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The Residential School legacy: Parents who fear teachers

Edmonton – For Indigenous parents who were born into legacies of residential schooling and racial discrimination, interacting with teachers is complicated, but according to a new study published in the August issue of the Canadian Review of Sociology, this history affects middle-class and lower-class Indigenous parents in different ways.

The paper’s author, Dr. Emily Milne, Assistant Professor, MacEwan University, carried out 50 interviews with educators and parents from four Southern Ontario school boards. Forty of the interviewees identified as Indigenous, mainly Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe and Métis.

Milne found that middle-class Indigenous parents interacted with teachers as relative equals, and were often vocal in advocating for their children. In the case of lower-class Indigenous parents, the intergenerational experience of residential schooling appears to have magnified feelings of discomfort with teachers. “I have the worst fear of teachers, to be honest with you,” said one participant. “Even if the teacher is the same age as me, I’m still nervous around them.”

“This is a major problem,” said Milne, “because parents’ engagement with teachers often leads to educational advantages for their children.” The children of lower-class Indigenous parents may be denied important resources, such as supplementary learning materials and entrance to after-school or academically gifted programs.

Milne warns that it is critical that teachers ensure they are making schools more meaningful and inclusive for Indigenous parents and families, especially when education policies typically identify “active parent involvement” as an expectation. “Parents are not uniform and not all parents interact with educators in the same way,” added Milne. “But, many teachers are overlooking how their interactions with parents might be a key piece of the educational process.”

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