

Student Health and Well-Being in Indigenous Communities: “No One Is Healed Until Everyone Is Healed”

Maggie MacDonnell

Abstract

In this interview, Maggie MacDonnell, recipient of the 2017 Global Teacher Prize, discusses how growing up near a First Nations reserve in Nova Scotia opened her eyes to inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. She talks about the influence of Moses Coady, who instilled in her an appreciation for co-operative development, and T’hohahoken Michael Doxtater, an Indigenous scholar at McGill University, whose message, “No one is healed until everyone is healed,” she did not fully appreciate until she began working in the Inuit village of Salluit. She describes the life situation of the youth living in this kind of closed community where addiction and violence often become part of their everyday experience. Her interventions with this group of at-risk youth have helped decrease the school drop-out rate, improve students’ work and social skills, and raise awareness about suicide prevention. She concludes by giving advice to teachers who may be interested in working with students in remote communities.

Can you talk about your life and educational experiences which you feel have contributed to your strong commitment to the health and well-being of youth in the northern-most towns in Quebec?

I grew up in a very small rural community called Afton, located in Nova Scotia near Antigonish. I grew up quite close to a First Nations reserve. As well, I went to school with kids from that reserve: we went to a mixed school together. From an early age, just sharing a school with them and being physically close to their reserve, I understood that there were some inherent inequalities that existed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. I was raised with certain cues or commentary or education from my parents to kind of make sure that my eyes were opened to those inequalities, but also with a lot of compassion as well.

My mother is also from a very small community called Margaree, located on the island of Cape Breton in Nova Scotia. It’s famous for having an incredible adult educator called Dr. Moses Coady, who really integrated education with community development for rural communities. Margaree is a community that is very much strengthened by collective values, and my mom passed that down to me in many senses...while going to elementary, junior high, and high school, that was really important to me in my lifestyle.

Academically, I usually did quite well in school. I really enjoyed school because it was kind of a logical environment as compared to life. School seemed a little bit more stable—if you worked hard, you could get a better grade and better feedback. Sometimes life is not always that clear cut at all, depending on

people's personal situations or the unfair inequities that they're born into. I enjoyed school a lot and really enjoyed the extracurriculars as well as physical education and physical activities. I was very much involved in that side of the school life and I also think my parents were seeing the value in that and they put in a lot of time driving me to practices. Again, we lived in a rural area, so you're very dependent upon transportation to get around or access services when you grow up in that type of environment. I am thankful to my teachers in those early years who invested so much of their personal time in ensuring we had these quality opportunities.

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[After completing my master's degree], I was accepted to be a Jeanne Sauvé fellow. I recall it sort of like an incubator for young international leadership. Fourteen youth leaders from around the world came together for a residential fellowship. We lived in a beautiful house on Doctor Penfield; it was sort of a residential, academic, and leadership experience program for 14 selected scholars from all over the world. I lived there with people from Rwanda, Israel, South Africa, another colleague from Nova Scotia, people from Toronto, Montreal, England, Cuba. What a rich experience that was! We lived together and were able to take courses at McGill University. [I remember taking a course given by T'hohahoken Michael Doxtater] ... that was the first time I was ever able to take a course offered by an Indigenous person, which impressed me so much. He was [an Indigenous] scholar and taught out of the Faculty of Education at McGill. He would repeatedly state throughout his classes this one quote which I'll never forget: "No one is healed until everyone is healed." That quote really stayed in my mind, but then I'll refer back to it later. I don't think I knew quite what it meant when I was in the classroom, but I understood later when I got to a closed community in Salluit...how much that quote was so very true.

I finished my time at McGill and got involved in lots of different things. I did a soccer program for people who were homeless. I did really cool workshops at Kahnawake Survival School. I was involved in all sorts of things—I am too curious! I even had an interest in chocolatiering: I was looking into a social chocolate enterprise in Tanzania. I tend to be interested in learning all sorts of things—sometimes I can be a bit random to follow from the outside. I finished that time and then went off to take on a short-term contract with a fellow scholar in Goma, Congo. We were working for CARE and helping them develop their strategic plan. I brought a feminist and post-colonial lens, which I gained from the University of Toronto, and also a focus on young people, which has sort of always been there. We did some really fascinating research work there. Just as I was about to finish up, my sister, who at the time was a social worker in Salluit, sent me a message to say that they were still looking for a teacher. That was October...they're having a hard time hiring one...reflective of how difficult it is to recruit staff to come work in Indigenous communities. She got in touch with the principal who got in touch with me. We did a Skype interview—somehow that must have been magical for the Internet to work all the way up in Salluit and all the way in Goma on that same day. I sat outside under a palm tree on a picnic table and did the interview, and lo and behold the next day they offered me a job. [So], I went up to Salluit.

People asked me why I wanted to work in an Indigenous community. To me, I just kind of thought that's a pretty logical step considering I'd always been so interested in community development, international

development, etc. These issues you can find in any community, but particularly in Canada I think they're very salient in Indigenous communities. I was hopeful that perhaps some of my previous education and my experiences could sharpen my work or make my work effective in that context. But, honestly, I went in very humble of the history that existed, the colonial history between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. I knew it would be very challenging and, honestly, I thought this might be an incredibly privileged experience as a non-Indigenous white Canadian to be able to go and live there and at least learn myself. First, as a Canadian, I felt I like I sort of had a moral responsibility to learn first-hand. Again, I'm privileged enough to be able to have these degrees behind my belt that get me professional positions that I can go and live in these communities and learn first-hand, but I really do enjoy immersing myself in their cross-cultural environment. I do specifically seek them out.

What are the major issues that youth and others face in Salluit and beyond?

The Inuit, who are local people, face the challenges related to inter-generational trauma and we see them carry that baggage in on their shoulders every day. To help me, some of the inter-generational traumas, in case your audience is not as familiar with them—in terms of how the Inuit have been affected by colonization—includes, but is not limited to, the Residential School experience, which I'm sure you as academics know, probably quite familiar with, that children were taken from homes, forcibly removed from the family structure, brought thousands of miles away, kept for long periods of time, made to feel ashamed of their culture, abused... They're still finding, unfortunately, graveyards of Indigenous kids at these former residential schools. That's a huge trauma that would have affected the communities. On top of that, we can also look at forced relocation or forced resettlement. At the time in terms of Canada and the colonial desire for Arctic sovereignty, the Inuit were very much pressured to give up a traditional nomadic, semi-nomadic, or seasonally nomadic lifestyle...to settle permanently in one area and were promised adequate housing and services in return for sort of giving up that style of life. And, of course, to ensure Arctic sovereignty access to mineral wealth and all the benefits that come to Canada for having such a large land mass in their nation's borders. Some families were forced and they were split up, and they were sent to live in some places that were quite harsh and not very ideal for actual settling.

We can also talk about tuberculosis, a disease that was unknown to them brought in by European Canadians and had a huge devastating effect on the communities. I have heard stats say as many as one out of four people were living with tuberculosis, and had to be removed for treatment for years at a time because, again, no treatment was provided. And, again, to this date, we still have tuberculosis, sadly, alive and vibrant in these Inuit communities that I've been in. As an example in the community of Salluit, just recently, perhaps less than two years ago, there was as many as 30 people who were living with active tuberculosis, including some of our students. This is not what we think of when we think of Canadian healthcare, Canadian issues that Canadians are facing. I'll speak on this later—but on top of the major traumas there are decades of underfunding for Indigenous communities. This further complicated everything. The housing crisis is an obvious example.

One of the biggest inter-generational traumas was the dog slaughter. Sled dogs were of immense importance to the Inuit. They not only represented transportation—they represented hunting, access to food, how to safely navigate the land. When you're with a dog team you can still get home after a blizzard—the dogs know their way home. A skidoo doesn't know its way home; a skidoo will break down on the land. A skidoo is not very reliable. I've heard elders talk about how the dogs were like family members to them...the puppies of certain dogs that belonged to their grandfather...there is a real close connection...that they were family members...and these dogs knew where a certain elder loved to stop and have tea on his fishing trips. That was the closeness of the relationship they had with these animals. When the RCMP actually went on to conduct the dog slaughter, this had a tremendously devastating effect on the community. I've heard first-hand, elders say to me...there is this one elder who was taken away to a Residential School who lost her mother to tuberculosis and she returned to find her father the day he came home and found his dogs slaughtered. He had been through how many traumas, and she said: "That's the day he started to drink." And that's the day that alcohol and addiction entered her family.

This is what young people are born into: they're dealing with these inter-generational traumas, further complicated by decades of underfunding. Currently, in Nunavik, they are short over 1,000 housing units according to a Senate report. What I'd like to try share with people who haven't yet had the privilege like I have of living here, when I say there's not enough units, I mean there's really no place to rent. The only reason I have a place to stay is because my employer provides me with a house. Imagine if all the school boards across Canada had to provide housing for their teachers, how much more complicated...how much more expensive their operating budgets would be. There literally [are] no empty units, no empty housing to just go rent. A lot of people I know in Salluit stay on waiting lists for social housing for over a decade, for 15 years. By this time, they're mature...they're in their late 30s...they've had one, two, three kids...and they're still having to live under the roof of their parents in a very overcrowded, overrun house that may also be very likely experiencing addiction, and potentially even other levels of abuse, domestic violence or things like that.

What this can look like in terms of the student is that it's very common for my students to sleep in the living room. You sleep in a living room and there's 14 people in a three-bedroom house...you probably don't get to go to bed at nine o'clock or ten o'clock...maybe you go to bed at two in the morning, three in the morning, whenever the TV goes off or the video games go off or whenever the last person gets home or things like that. Even the idea that our students don't even necessarily have the privilege of coming to school well rested is an issue we see within our students as well.

At the Kativik School Board, they've been giving us training on what they call "The Compassionate-Based Schools Approach," and what they try to teach us, so we know as teachers, is that many of our students are coming to school with these traumas and that really affects their brains. Often, young people might be in what we call kind of a "state of fright or flight." When they're in that high-stressed or high-trauma state, it's very difficult for their brains to be able to focus, connect, to think about executive functioning and tasks like that. As teachers, we really need to think about how we create a safe and secure

environment within our classrooms, within our school. How do we create routines that can help calm them from whatever baggage they might be bringing from the night before?

I'll also throw in food insecurity. I didn't mention that. Recent stats show that food insecurity in the North where I live in Nunavik is at 52%. Other research estimates it to be as high as an alarming 70%. Again, not a statistic most Canadians would associate with their own country. That's an issue we're facing. As a school, all of this is going to come into the classroom—there's no way for it not to.

Tell us some of the ways you've been able to turn students away from these problems and engage them in finding solutions?

I guess there's sort of two parts to that answer. One part is I had to come in and sort of understand myself what some of the issues were and what were some of the barriers I could actually maybe have an impact on. At the time when I got there I was teaching a Life Skills program and it was coed on paper, so boys and girls, but it mainly just had boys sign up. And I was teaching a program for youth who were considered the most at risk, but still engaged in the school population. By this I mean they were dropouts who I had to recruit to come back to school or kids who were identified as "about to drop out," very poor attendance, etc. A lot of these kids though did have some pretty harsh reputations: they were known as bullies, vandals in the community; they might have come from very unstable families. A lot of them were smoking cigarettes at a very young age, had regular drug use as well; some of them had criminal activities. It was very difficult with those very strong male characters in my class at the time to also bring in girls. It took me a few months, but I realized that that was a major barrier excluding girls: the girls don't want to come into the class with these male students; they did not necessarily feel safe around them...so it's kind of this invisible population that we're not reaching. We think we're targeting the dropouts, but we're actually just targeting the boys, and there isn't something similar for girls. I just don't think at that point, considering the nature of the gender relationships in the community, considering that girls do experience a lot of sexual harassment and violence, they necessarily felt safe to enter a life skills program, predominantly with a lot of male students.

I was able to convince my principal and the school board to create a whole other program just for girls. Part of my approach was what I needed to make a structural change. We had to create a whole other program...we needed another resource in here. By the time I was in my second and a half year in the community, we had both a boys-only program and a girls-only program. By the way, I named some rough things that those boys had been through...[but] I also had a very close relationship with them and I did projects with them that I'm incredibly proud of. And that's where that comment from McGill professor [T'hohahoken Michael Doxtater], "No one is healed until everyone is healed," really resonated a lot with me because I saw how important every single person was in a closed community. Just as much as I have a strong desire to work with girls, especially those at disadvantage—I think working with young males is equally as important in restoring healthy and balanced gender relations and norms.

I tried to do programming that would connect more to [the girls'] needs or interests. Part of it was work placement, so they're learning employment skills. I actually helped them get jobs in the mornings where they would earn money. We would go there as a group, so they had social support. I was there with them, to help them if issues came up with their supervisor or fellow colleagues—I could help navigate that. I could help them gain the skills they needed for their specific employment. Most of them ended up working at the day care. That was really powerful for them too. I think that was really transformative for my students to be suddenly in a situation where their skill set could grow easily and was of immediate intangible value.

We also did things like a community kitchen...we would make special meals just for elders. There is a local activist in our community who's very prominent at the regional level. Her name is Annie Alaku—she's an elder, she's a healer, and she's a survivor herself of sexual violence. We would work with her on different programs that she was giving to help prevent more sexual violence. Here are these young girls, 13 to 18, and we found sometimes as young as 11...they're getting to work with this elder...gaining a lot of practical real-life experience...and what I began to call, "acts of kindness" in the community.

We also initiated and ran a program called "Students feeding Students." Food insecurity is a huge issue in Nunavik, and access to healthy food is really expensive and unaffordable for many. So we found funding for my students to make healthy nutritious snacks for the entire student population every day. We had this really fun smoothie bike that we would use—basically a bike with a blender—and we would "pedal" smoothies for all the students. It was fun, healthy, nutritious, and an important act of service for my students.

How can health and well-being be promoted more universally in Quebec's remote communities?

More funding needs to be released for it. There is such a strong, very vibrant underground drug economy in these communities. Youth are exposed to that at a very tender age in their development. I think if you want to attract young people to make different choices, you really have to put some funding behind it. Again, I don't know how to talk public health numbers and what's substantial and what's not, but if I look at the fitness centre we created in Salluit, that was \$100,000 initially and it's been going on for five years now. Right now, that is pro-rated to \$20,000 a year. It provides employment for young people. It's inspired young people to think about personal training or kinesiology as a career, which they hadn't thought of before. It's helped two students that I know lose so much weight that they're no longer at risk of diabetes ... and I would have considered them to be pre-diabetic when they first started going. I have over 20 youth who can easily run 10-km races, and six runners who have competed and finished a half-marathon, all in their teenage years. Some have quit smoking, and returned to school, and improved their sleeping habits because of the running program. My runners have been recognized and become Healthy Role Models for the region—inspiring other kids to run, be active, make healthy food choices, decrease smoking, etc. I think this is an excellent return on a \$100,000 investment. There needs to be a lot more investment into recreation generally in remote areas and especially in the North. I think

that area is very much under-funded...and recreation you have to fund it to compete enough with the addiction economy.

I don't think I spoke about it directly, but Nunavik is [experiencing] a unique suicide crisis and we've lost a lot of young people to suicide. One thing my runners have told me...is that the cultivation of that physically active lifestyle is actually building a lot of resilience within them and it becomes a coping strategy. Sometimes when they're facing their own suicidal thoughts—and again, so many of our young people have witnessed and lost multiple people to suicide. So many of our young people in this region are having their own thoughts of suicide. When they're in that space of having suicidal thoughts, those that have a healthy coping strategy—such as running, playing soccer, participating in snow shoe, cross-country skiing, going for a bike ride, going for a walk, playing traditional Inuit games, coming to the fitness centre—that's all a healthy coping strategy—it helps them. And it connects them to other youth also making healthy choices. You have social support and this is so crucial. Because one thing I'll say for teenagers here in Nunavik who choose to be healthy, it's very lonely. You don't have a lot of friends right away. Most of your friends are smoking pot, drinking, partying, etc. even from the tender age of 12 or less. By creating these teens' clubs, physical places like recreation centres where young people can come, those that are choosing to live a drug-free lifestyle or largely a drug-free lifestyle, they can connect with other young people and they can support each other there. And the combination of both having that direct coping strategy through physical activity and having the social support of other young people is actually turned into suicide prevention.

To sum up, what suggestions do you have for aspiring teachers who wish to prepare themselves for teaching and advocating for students in remote communities?

You always have to start with yourself and, as much as possible, try to educate yourself to the different histories that might be in these remote places, especially if you're not an insider, you're coming in as an outsider. I think it's really important to educate yourself. One of the best lessons I learned through the Coady Institute was a reminder that we have two eyes, two ears, and one mouth. There is a lot of information we can take in before we make any statements or judgments or proclamations, etc. There is a lot to observe, to witness, and to listen to before you necessarily need to be the expert or jump to definitive conclusions. Sometimes I feel not in the right position being seen as a spokesperson for this area as well. I didn't grow up here. I'm still learning all the layers of the iceberg that are here. But that's a very important thing you need to do first, and I think particularly important in the Canadian context if we're talking about Indigenous communities because I think they're often so racially profiled in a negative light. People really need to unlearn *that* history and *that* profiling and reeducate themselves into a more appropriate, truthful, genuine history of what Indigenous people have been overcoming in Canada.



Maggie MacDonnell grew up in rural Nova Scotia and after completing her Bachelor's degree, spent five years volunteering and working in sub-Saharan Africa, largely in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention. After completing her Master's degree, she found her country was beginning to wake up to the decades of abuse that Canadian Indigenous people have lived through, including assaults on the environment and enormous economic and social inequality. As such, she sought out opportunities to learn more about this history, while teaching in an Indigenous community in Canada. For the last seven years she has been a teacher in a fly-in Inuit village called Salluit, nestled in the Canadian Arctic. This is home to the second northernmost Inuit community in Quebec, with a population of just over 1,400—it cannot be reached by road, only by air. In winter temperatures reach minus 50C. The region and the community have been gripped by a suicide crisis. At one point in this close-knit village, they lost 10 youth to suicide in a span of just two years.