

A Conversation with Charlene Bearhead

How do we create and support positive learning environments

>> I would say the number one consideration would be, do children see themselves in their school environments? Children certainly didn't in residential schools see themselves. Not only were they, their families, their communities not respected -- in fact, were disrespected -- but they didn't see themselves. And some people would say, well, later on in the residential school system, there were First Nation, Metis and Inuit people that were working in the schools. But is that really the children seeing themselves? For the most part, people who were operating the schools or running the schools or working in schools in later years that were First Nation, Metis or Inuit people, in many cases they were people that had been so impacted by what I would call "brainwashing" that happened in residential schools, that they came to believe that that was the way, or they were forced to believe that that was the best way that they could succeed, whatever that is, in this Western, Eurocentric society. But we are in a different place now. So as we look at our schools, it's partially about, how do indigenous children see themselves in their schools? Do they see teachers? Do they see support workers? Do they see value from non-indigenous teachers in their work? We often hear people say, "First Nation kids need First Nation teachers." "Inuit kids need Inuit teachers." They do. But non-indigenous kids need First Nation teachers. Non-indigenous kids need Inuit teachers and Metis teachers. This is who we are collectively in this country. So I feel like part of what's really important about developing supportive and respectful and positive learning environments is about what we know about one another, because when we learn the truth and see the strength and the validity of the knowledge and the importance of indigenous knowledge, and the respect of all perspectives and different knowledge, then students have the opportunity not only to see themselves in a good way, but to see others in a good way, and to understand, truly understand, the value of other perspectives and other cultures and other groups of people. So I think when we see one another through truth and we see one another in a better way, then we talk to one another in a better way, and we talk about one another in a better way. So in that, I think there's part of what we do directly as educators to create a positive learning environment in our whole school, in our classrooms between students, but also when we model that and we genuinely respect other perspectives and especially indigenous perspectives, diversity is so important. We need to value diversity. But we also have to value the uniqueness within that diversity, and not just that, oh, we're all one world the same, we don't see things differently. Well, we do. And we need to respect the uniqueness in that, and the most unique perspective that we have in this country is that of First Nation people, Metis people, Inuit people. Because the first peoples of this country are the only people in all cultural groups and from all different backgrounds that are rooted only in this land, and in the water, and in the plants, and in the knowledge, and in the teachings. So I think that if we take an indigenous perspective on how we value one another, then we will create respectful and positive learning environments, where the children themselves then see one another, talk to one another, talk about one another in a respectful manner.