

Book Review

Creating Space: My Life and Work in Indigenous Education

Verna J. Kirkness

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194 pages including index

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I hold up my hands to Dr. Verna J. Kirkness (Ni-Jing-Jada) for sharing her life's work and creating more space for the current and future waves of Indigenous scholars in education. Many Elders assert that education is the key for the survival of Indigenous peoples. Dr. Kirkness epitomizes how the Elders' assertion is acted upon in her accomplishments to advance "Indian control of Indian Education" (p. 74).

The book contains seven chapters of storytelling that teach about the history of Aboriginal education in Canada and that outline Kirkness' direct involvement in supporting Aboriginal education's development. Information about her personal life and dedication to Indigenous education is skillfully written to engage the reader and capture her/his attention throughout. Kirkness' intention is to provide a window on the past. This window is an opening to bring light and to allow Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike to understand the historical barriers, challenges, imbalances, and positive development of Indian education, particularly in Canada. This book is another example of the pivotal contributions Kirkness put forth to revolutionize Indigenous education. Her story includes intimate glimpses of her family along with her jobs, bosses, colleagues, friends, relationships, and the shifts in Aboriginal education. She reflects on her approach to writing, and sees it as akin to talking with someone over a cup of tea. She has the steadfast ability to communicate with people in communities as well as state diplomats.

Verna J. Kirkness begins the book with her dedicated passion for school and learning. Intertwined with her passion are stories of human character, one example being how she did not know her biological father. Her forthrightness in sharing her personal story will resonate with many Indigenous people who grew up on reserves and Indigenous families that experienced dis-connection from each other; however, her story also shows how families form strong connections despite difficulties. Her tenacity, honesty, and strength align with the evolution of her career and commitment to advance Aboriginal education.

There is honourable mention of her mentors, peers, leaders, and supports. She acknowledges that producing quality education for Aboriginal

people is a collective affair. Her path as a visionary was strategic. Her roles and projects continually created space to impact change. She moved from teaching to counselling and then into supervising, consulting, managing, and directing positions. Each position was a ladder with added responsibility and authority. Money and prestige were never her motivation; rather, her career decisions gained momentum to advance the performance of Aboriginal students. She was disturbed by how students were streamlined into special education classes, one example being how they contributed to nominal role fees in public schools. The inequities were unfair.

Kirkness sheds light on the 1969 *White Paper*, introduced by Prime Minister Trudeau to create a “just society” (p. 68). However, the intent was to eliminate the special status of Indians and remove special rights gained through treaties. She accelerated her roles provincially with the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood (MIB) and then nationally with the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB). At the time, there were “inaccuracies and omissions” of Indian contributions to Canadian history in texts and less than 15 per cent of teachers had specialized training in cross-cultural education while less than 10 per cent had knowledge of Indian languages (p. 79). Sadly, Indian education within public schools was lacking in these areas. As a result, Indigenous educators are continually promoting accurate history and cross-cultural education, which includes the acknowledgement of diverse languages and cultures. During her tenure with the NIB, Dr. Kirkness describes how the team supported George Manuel to effectively create a Joint NIB-Cabinet Committee to resolve challenges with Indian education. She regrets how she and several staff left the organization when Manuel did not run for re-election since the Joint Committee was working on revising Sections 114 to 123 of the *Indian Act*. After a new president was elected, the committee was disbanded so the revision was never accomplished (p. 85). Unfortunately, this was a major loss; on the other hand, Kirkness contributed to many more great global educational initiatives.

Verna J. Kirkness concludes her autobiography with stories about her leadership roles with the Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP) and the creation of the First Nations House of Learning (FNHL) at the University of British Columbia (UBC). These important initiatives seeded the growth for Indigenous education in BC. The “home away from home” environment of the First Nations Longhouse at UBC especially supports Indigenous students on campus. The historical importance of NITEP and FNHL are informative, greatly appreciated, and cannot be underestimated. Her book poses challenges and opportunities for scholars to learn about, understand, and transform Indigenous control of Indigenous education.

References

- Kirkness, V. J. (2013). *Creating space: My life and work in Indigenous education*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press.