

The Tragedy of Canadian Residential Schools

© the CJPME Foundation, Analysis 2014-002-v1, issued May, 2014

OVERVIEW:

The dire situation of Canada's Indigenous peoples can be neither understood nor adequately addressed without reference to the damaging effects of the residential school system imposed for over a century. A critical assessment of the residential schools system also implicitly calls into question other assumptions about the relationship between mainstream Canadian society and Indigenous peoples in Canada, and the responsibilities of not only governments but also non-Indigenous Canadians vis-à-vis Canada's Aboriginal peoples.

The initial justification for residential schools in Canada

The residential school system was a creation of the Canadian federal government, in collusion with the churches, to eradicate Aboriginal ways of living and to oblige Aboriginal peoples to adopt a Euro-Canadian (often decidedly Anglo-Canadian) Christianity, culture and world vision. The government and churches stripped First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities of their children, removing the children from their families and communities and obliging them to live in the schools, often hundreds of miles away, for most of the year. The government and churches forced Christian religious practices and Euro-Canadian culture on the children, at the expense of their relationships with their communities of origin and their families and with their own spirituality. The residential schools system generated a massive nihilism that has not been healed. White Canadians generally supported the system and for over a century turned a blind eye to the abuses being perpetrated in it.



Cultural assimilation and religious indoctrination

Although the stated purpose of the schools was the education of Indigenous children, it is now clear that the ultimate goal was assimilation of these children into the Euro-Canadian way of life.¹ Residential schools were administered by Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist churches.² Student accounts and photos indicate that the teachers and other school authorities frequently denigrated Indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices and obliged the students to adopt the resident churches' religious practices.³

Because the intention of the government and churches was ultimately to eradicate Aboriginal culture, the residential school system is often considered an instrument of cultural genocide.⁴ Many Indigenous people consider the residential school system the single most damaging element in their encounter with Euro-Canadians.

Attendance rates of Indigenous peoples in residential school

From 1857 until the closing of the last school in 1996, approximately 150,000 First Nation, Métis and Inuit children attended residential schools.⁵ In the early 1900s, about one-sixth of Indigenous school-age children were in residential schools, and by the 1940s, half were.⁶ Children aged 4 to 16 attended schools for up to ten months a year, as the schools were often far from their homes.^{7,8} In total, there were 136 residential schools across Canada.⁹

The many problems with residential schools

Marginalization of parents and Indigenous leaders from decisions regarding the education of Indigenous children

The First Nations entered into treaties with the British Crown that were given to Canada's federal government at Confederation to implement. The first treaties stipulated that the parents and chiefs had a role in choosing the education of the Indigenous communities' children. However, over time, the federal

government ignored and then marginalized the parents and chiefs from decision-making about the education of Indigenous children.

Cognitive domination

The residential school system bolstered and ensured Euro-Canadian domination over Aboriginal peoples by undermining Aboriginal children's confidence in and knowledge of Aboriginal ways of living and belief systems. In effect, the residential school system enabled the government and the churches to colonise Aboriginal students' minds. The disrespect for Aboriginal culture in the residential schools was pervasive.

In order to facilitate this "white-washing" of Aboriginal children's minds, the government took children away from their families and kept them in the schools, depriving them of the love, support and knowledge systems of their families and communities, and preventing the children from acquiring the knowledge they needed to live in place on the land with their elders. The teachers taught the children, both explicitly and implicitly, that Aboriginal knowledge and their identities as distinct peoples in Canada were useless, demeaning and relics of the past.

The classroom conditions and living conditions in the schools and the school teachers' abusive treatment of the children compounded these traumas.:

Abuse of students

Teachers and other adults at the schools frequently abused the children—psychologically, physically, emotionally and sexually. Survivor testimonies indicate that in some schools, rates of sexual abuse may have been as high as 75 percent.¹⁰ Teachers often brutally punished children for speaking Indigenous languages. School authorities often provided an inadequate diet to the children, although they themselves ate splendid meals in the children's presence.¹¹ The school authorities also restricted the children's contact with siblings, and subjected some students to forced abortions.¹² They allowed scientific experiments to be conducted on some of the children.¹³

In addition, the arbitrary imposition of Euro-Canadian practices that may have seemed innocuous to school authorities sometimes caused considerable suffering among students. A good example of this was the custom of cutting the students' braids on entry to the schools. In some First Nations groups, one's braids were only cut on the death of a parent. So, children already traumatised by separation from their parents were further alarmed and saddened by the thought that their mother or father had died.

High illness and mortality rates

Neither the churches nor the government ensured that the schools were healthy places to study and live. The schools were overcrowded and poorly ventilated, which, in combination with malnutrition, led to a high incidence of tuberculosis, very frequently fatal.¹⁴ Due to the poor maintenance of the schools, fires were frequent, killing or injuring many students.¹⁵ A 1907 government report states that 24 percent of previously healthy children died in the schools, and that between 47 and 75 percent of students released early from the schools (often because they were ill) died shortly after returning home.¹⁶ Recent reports indicate that at least 4000 students died in residential schools.¹⁷

Poor education

The government underfunded the schools, and more time was spent on trade work and other labour than in class. The teachers were poorly trained; in 1945, fewer than 40 percent had had formal training. In 1930, only 3 percent of students advanced past sixth grade,¹⁸ leaving them poorly equipped for the workforce. Many teachers did not encourage the students to aspire to high school, let alone post-secondary education, and did not provide them with the academic formation at the elementary level needed to do so.¹⁹

Thus, the mis-education provided by the schools left the children as ill-equipped for life in a modern industrial society as for life in Aboriginal communities.

The impact of the residential school system on Indigenous peoples

Severe personal trauma among the former students

Many former students suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and low self-esteem, leading to high rates of substance abuse and suicide, mistrust and avoidance of Canadian institutions (including educational ones), high unemployment and poverty.²⁰

Intergenerational trauma

The separation of students from their families and the abuses they suffered in the schools had negative impacts on their own parenting skills, and thus on their children and grandchildren. Among today's First Nations individuals aged 10 to 44, suicide and self-inflicted injury is the number one cause of death. First Nations women and men are respectively eight and five times more likely to commit suicide than other Canadians.²¹ Rates of teen pregnancy, spousal violence and incarceration are also significantly higher.²²

Destruction of Indigenous culture and knowledge

The schools taught Indigenous children that their parents' ways were sinful, backward and destructive. Manifestations of Indigenous culture, such as using traditional clothing, hairstyles, and speaking native languages, were forbidden.²³ The prohibition on the use of Indigenous languages significantly reduced the number of people who can speak Indigenous languages. In 2001, only 24 percent of Indigenous people said they could communicate in an Indigenous language.²⁴ This loss of language led to further breakages in family and community relationships, as children could no longer communicate with their families. Furthermore, as Indigenous culture is passed down orally, the inability of children to communicate with community elders prevented them from learning traditional Indigenous belief systems.²⁵

The steps that have been taken to remedy the damages caused by residential schools

Government monetary reparations to former students

A class action suit by the victims of residential schools obliged the government to agree, in 2007, to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Under this agreement, Common Experience payments were available to students of residential schools who qualified, and the government and churches were released from further liability related to the schools. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was also established, with a broad mandate that includes acknowledging residential school experiences, providing a setting for those affected to come forward, and raising awareness of the residential school system among all Canadians. However, although the Commission has made a number of recommendations, the final report of the commission is still in progress and the government has implemented few of its own. For example, the government funded a Commemoration initiative, and provided a grant to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, created to help former students. However, this funding ended in 2010.²⁶

In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper officially apologised to former residential school students on behalf of his predecessors. Many churches involved in running the schools have also made official apologies to Indigenous communities yet many have not turned over their data on their previous students.

Indigenous people's stances regarding government measures so far

Indigenous leaders believe that the apology and Common Experience payments must be complemented with other actions, some requiring funding, to help Indigenous individuals and communities heal. Indigenous groups have also asked the government to release all documents related to residential schools, to enable a complete history of the abuses suffered by students to be constructed and made known.²⁷ Members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have recommended that the government educate the public on the legacy of residential schools, and provide further funding for mental health care among Indigenous populations, with a focus on childhood trauma and traditional healing methods. They have also recommended funding for parenting programs.²⁸

The role that Canadians have in the events of the past involving children who attended Indian Residential Schools

Aboriginal peoples have been subjected to persistent prejudices and discrimination and many Canadians continue to be unaware of Indian Residential Schools and the effects of human rights violations and massive

suffering then and now. Many people continue to blame Aboriginal people for their poverty, lack of education or employment, and broken family life. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has strongly asserted that the Indian Residential Schools are not Aboriginal people's history but Canada's dark hidden history. Their work over the last decade has been to end that silence of that history and to bring to the consciousness of Canadians that First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples have a place in the Canada's present and future. First, they must be heard and Canadians accept their role in the complicities of racism of their government and churches and individuals involved in the schools and the benefits these have accrued to white settler society.

Aboriginal youth are one of Canada's largest growing demographic, and they must be factored into the Canadian economic and social and political future. The healing from Indian Residential Schools will require a national healing of all roles and responsibilities and accountabilities of Canadians. This is the first step in advancing a healing foundation for Aboriginal peoples and Canadian settlers and immigrants.

¹"The Residential School System", Indigenous Foundations, accessed on January 24, 2014,

<http://Indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-residential-school-system.html>

²"Indian Residential Schools Commemoration Project," Anishinabek Nation, Accessed on January 24, 2014, <http://www.anishinabek.ca/irscp/irscp-about-residential.asp>

³ Ibid.

⁴"The Residential School System", Indigenous Foundations, UBC.

⁵"Indian Residential Schools – Key Milestones," AANDC.

⁶ "Misconceptions of Canada's Indian Residential School System," Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

⁷"Indian Residential Schools Commemoration Project," Ibid.

⁸ "100 Years of Loss". Legacy of Hope..

⁹"Indian Residential Schools – Key Milestones," AANDC.

¹⁰ "Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," Cultural Survival.

¹¹ "Ex-residential school students recall painful days". Star Phoenix, May 7, 2008

¹² "Indian Residential Schools Commemoration Project," Ibid.

¹³ Mosby, Ian. "Administering Colonial Science: Nutrition Research and Human Biomedical Experimentation in Aboriginal Communities and Residential Schools," *Social History*, vol. 46, no. 91. (May 2013), p. 145-72.

¹⁴ "TB and Aboriginal People", Canadian Public Health Association. <http://www.cpha.ca/en/programs/history/achievements/02-id/tb-Aboriginal.aspx>.

¹⁵ Knockwood, Isabelle. Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaq Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia. Lockeport, NS: 2001, p. 132-4.

¹⁶ Milloy, John S. A National Crime : The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986. University of Manitoba Press, 1999. p. 91-2.

¹⁷ Kennedy, Mark. "At least 4,000 Aboriginal children died in residential schools, commission finds". The National Post. January 3 2014.

¹⁸ "100 Years of Loss," Legacy of Hope, *ibid.* .

¹⁹ "The Residential School System," Indigenous Foundations, *Ibid.*

²⁰ Chansonneuve, D. Addictive Behaviours Among Aboriginal People in Canada. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2007. p. 14

²¹ Frideres, James S. and Rene Gadacz. Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008. pp. 81, 85

²² Chansonneuve, D. Addictive Behaviours Among Aboriginal People in Canada. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2007. p. 14

²³ "The Residential School System," Indigenous Foundations. *Ibid.*

²⁴ Norris, M.J. "Aboriginal languages in Canada: Emerging trends and perspectives on second language acquisition," *Canadian Social Trends*, vol.83 (2007), p. 20.

²⁵ Blair, H., S. Rice, V. Wood and J. Janvier. Daghida: Cold Lake first nation works towards Dene language revitalization. In B. Burnaby and J. Reyner, *Indigenous languages across the community*. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University, 2002, p. 89-98.

²⁶ "A History of Residential Schools in Canada," CBC News

²⁷ Strapagiel, Lauren. "Honour the Apology: Residential schools report prompts day of action". O Canada. July 25, 2013.

²⁸ "Canadians need to be educated about trauma of residential schools." *Globe and Mail*. February 24, 2012.