

Reconciliation -- for schooling? ...

Mandatory Residential Schools

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This is the second of three articles about reconciliation. Writing it has been difficult. It required me to face facts I would rather not admit to. It required me to alter my view of the world. Canada has not been the humane country I grew up believing in. Still, I journey on, learning Canada's history as our public schools did not teach it (although I am told that some do now). I share this painful story to help us all understand the present and plan for the future with greater foresight. Please join me on my journey.

Imagine the world of the 1800s. North America's open prairie and beautiful forests have been sparsely populated ... but that is changing. Encouraged by government policies offering free land, settlers are spreading across the prairies, soon followed by forts and law-keepers. In addition, thousands of First Nations people came north to Canada to escape American policies that resulted in mass starvation. Simultaneously, the vast herds of bison dwindled and disappeared creating terrible food shortages. Every parent must have feared for their children's future ... and then the children were taken away...

It is estimated that over 150,000 children were taken from their homes because of their Aboriginal heritage whether First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. They were taken by the truckload to residential schools far from home. Many children remained at residential schools for the 10 month academic year; some lived there year-round, without ever going home.

What was it like in residential schools?

Learning focused on European-style classroom academics, religious prayer, and tasks. That is, about 3 hours schooling and the remainder of the day spent on religious studies or services and tasks (usually household cleaning, cooking, baking bread for girls and farm

labour for boys). Some schools also taught carpentry, shoemaking, sewing and/or making lace. There were no nature studies or science labs.

There was little time for play, and no dancing. Singing hymns was allowed and some schools had brass bands or other instruments but practice-time often replaced the physical recreation hour. Very few Aboriginal children were taught beyond grade 6 at a time when grade 8 was considered the minimum for further studies or employment.

From the beginning, the children were taught that to be Indian was bad—name changed, braids cut, head shaved, soft moccasins exchanged for ill-fitting shoes that soon became too tight. Children were forbidden to speak their native language. Girls and boys were strictly segregated. If allowed at all, time with siblings attending the same school was short and monitored (e.g., 15 minutes weekly in a room with a supervisor).

Corporal punishment was common in all schools during this period in history (e.g., a ruler rapped on knuckles for speaking out of turn, a strapping in the principal's office for foul language). However, in residential schools, punishments could be severe—beatings with a heavy stick, kneeling for hours, withholding food, electric currents (cattle prods), isolation for days in dark closets, strapping on bare skin in front of peers, and worse. Many children suffered broken bones and severe lacerations ... for asking questions, speaking their own language, failing to complete assignments in a foreign language, coming late to a meal. In addition to physical abuse, verbal abuse belittling Indians was the norm and sexual abuse common (i.e., priests,

staff, and/or senior students assaulted over 50% of the children). Aboriginal children lived daily with fear and insecurity.

History of Indian Residential Schools

Primary Source—

<http://www.legacyofhope.ca/downloads/100-years-print.pdf>

1763

British King George III's Royal Proclamation explicitly states that Aboriginal title to lands in North America has existed and continues to exist, and that all land would be considered Aboriginal land until ceded by treaty. Respectful relationships promised.

1872

The Dominion Lands Act encourages European settlement in the Prairie Provinces by giving 160 acres of land to any settler who will build a homestead on the land and cultivate at least 40 acres.

1876

The Indian Act gives government exclusive right to identify who is an Indian and consolidates previous colonial ordinances that aimed to assimilate First Nations culture in favour of Euro-Canadian society. Amendments in 1884 prohibit traditional ceremonies (e.g., the Sun Dance); 1914 western Aboriginals must seek permission before appearing in Aboriginal "costume" in any public dance, stampede, etc.. Later amendments remove some discriminatory sections (e.g., 1951, 1985). Amendments in 1961 enable Aboriginals to vote.

1878

Up to 5,000 Sioux travelled north to Canadian prairies to escape starvation policies in USA. Many gather in Cypress Hills. Food is scarce. Fort Walsh established.

1883

Following recommendations made in the Davin Report, Sir John A. Macdonald directs creation of residential schools in Canadian West.

1885

Canadian Pacific Railway completed.

1885 (cont.)

First Nations and Métis, including Louis Riel, Gabriel Dumont, Poundmaker, and Big Bear, fight for the recognition of land and treaty rights in Saskatchewan. Riel and other leaders are hanged for treason. Poundmaker, Big Bear and others are imprisoned.

When? Where? WHY?

As early as 1820, churches had established both day schools and residential schools across Canada to spread Christianity. From 1831 to 1996, Indian residential schools existed in almost all provinces and territories, and in the North often took the form of hostels and tent camps.

In the 1840s, those governing Canada were discussing the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into the mainstream of society—not building a mosaic or multicultural society. Three influential reports proposed separating Aboriginal children from their parents as the best way to achieve assimilation (Bagot 1844, Ryerson 1847, Davin 1879). By 1883, the Government's stated purpose for residential schools was the "education, integration, assimilation and Christianization" of Aboriginal children into Canadian society.

"... Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from parental influence; and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men."

Sir John A MacDonald, Prime Minister of Canada 1867-1873, 1878-1891

In addition, during 1871-77, the Government of Canada signed seven Treaties to guide relationships with First Nations people on the prairies. One promise was to provide educational assistance. In light of the Treaties and obligations under the Indian Act (1876), the federal Government provided funding (small, per-student grants) and set policies governing residential schools. Sadly, the residential schools were not benign.

In 1883, while other children studied in one-room school houses close to home, the federal Government established three large, residential schools for First Nations children in western Canada. By 1931, residential schools were widespread, with 80 operating at the same time.

In all, during those 165 years (1831-1996), the federal Government funded 139 residential schools across Canada. The Government collaborated with churches to operate these schools—primarily the Roman Catholic (60%), Anglican (30%), and Presbyterian/United Churches (10%). Some churches or the provinces also operated a few residential schools independently with no federal funding.

Saskatchewan had 20 residential schools, with at least 6 remaining open in the 1970s. The last federally-funded Indian residential school in Canada, Gordon's School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, closed in 1996.

Who?

Photographs show that children as young as 3-5 attended these residential schools. Most of the children had First Nations heritage. Some Métis children attended residential schools but usually without Government coercion—many public schools did not welcome Métis children and other schools might not have been available.

By 1920, attendance at residential schools was mandatory for all First Nations children aged 7-15 (and also for Inuit children after 1951). But even before that, parents who failed to present their children for residential school were sometimes denied passes to leave the reserve or were punished in other ways (e.g., food rations withdrawn, jailed).

After 1933, Government representatives forced First Nations parents to surrender legal custody of their children to the principals of Indian residential schools, who assumed legal guardianship.

Families were destroyed, leaving behind grieving parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents. Whole communities were emptied of the sound of children laughing. And this went on for what must have seemed endless decades, affecting Aboriginal people for generations.

1889

Allegations emerge of physical and sexual abuse at Rupert's Land School in Selkirk, Manitoba. Influenza sweeps across western Canada.

1892

The federal government and certain Christian churches enter into a formal agreement to operate residential schools.

1896

Forty-five residential/industrial schools are operating in Canada.

1905

Manitoba, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Prince Edward Island had joined the Dominion of Canada; Newfoundland joined in 1949.

1920

Indian Affairs makes residential school attendance compulsory for children ages 7 to 15.

1939

The Supreme Court of Canada determines that Inuit are to be "classified" as Indian and governed by the Indian Act.

1940s

The federal government begins to apply provincial curriculum standards to residential schools and in some areas integrates Aboriginal students into regular schools.

1958

Indian Affairs regional inspectors recommend abolition of residential schools.

1960

Approximately 10,000 students are attending 60 residential schools across the Canada.

1969

The partnership between the government and churches ends, and the federal government takes over the residential school system. Transfer of control of the schools to Indian bands begins.

1982

The Constitution Act is amended and now recognizes and affirms the rights of "Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada."

Was it warm? Was the food good?

Much has been written about the conditions in these schools. Inspectors reported the schools were poorly constructed and not well maintained in most cases. Photographs show there was significant overcrowding in the large dormitories, with beds very close together. Survivors state they were frequently hungry and cold.

Under these poor living conditions, children often contracted tuberculosis, influenza, and other communicable diseases like small pox and measles. Without vaccines or antibiotics, the primary treatment was isolation, sometimes in tents outside the school regardless of the weather. Drugs effective against tuberculosis were not available until 1948. Thousands of children died. Some estimate that the mortality rate was 20 times greater among First Nations children compared to settler children living at home with their parents during the same period. By 1907, Dr Peter Bryce, a medical inspector, reported that conditions in residential schools in western Canada were “criminal” with death rates as high as 24% in some schools.

During the 1930s in particular, food was scarce for everyone. In residential schools, hunger was common, but not always due to food being unavailable. The children did the chores as in other farm households across the prairies—feed the chickens, hoe the garden, milk the cows, water the cattle. But some residential schools sold the butter, milk, and meat. The growing children did not benefit from their efforts to grow food.

1986-1994

The United Church, the Catholic Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Anglican Church, and the Presbyterian Church issue formal apologies for their participation in the residential school system.

1995

Arthur Henry Plint, former supervisor of the Alberni Indian residential school pleads guilty to 16 counts of indecent assault against students, and is sentenced to 11 years in prison.

1996

The Final Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples is released. It calls for a public inquiry into the effects of residential schools upon generations of First Peoples.

The last federally-run residential school closes—the Gordon Indian Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan.

2005

AFN National Chief Phil Fontaine announces a class action lawsuit against the Government of Canada over the legacy of the residential schools.

2006

The federal government, legal representatives of former students, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit representatives, and churches sign the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). The IRSSA is contentious to some, and does not represent Survivors of all schools.

2008

As part of the IRSSA, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) is launched.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper makes a formal, public apology on behalf of Canada to Survivors of the Residential School System.

2009

Pope Benedict XVI expresses sorrow about the abuse of residential school students during a private meeting with Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

What now?

“Despite the coercive measures that the government adopted, it failed to achieve its policy goals. Although Aboriginal peoples and cultures have been badly damaged, they continue to exist. Aboriginal people have refused to surrender their identity. It was the former students, the Survivors of Canada’s residential schools, who placed the residential school issue on the public agenda. Their efforts led to the negotiation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement that mandated the establishment of a residential school Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC).

The Survivors acted with courage and determination. We should do no less. It is time to commit to a process of reconciliation. By establishing a new and respectful relationship, we restore what must be restored, repair what must be repaired, and return what must be returned.”

Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (2015). Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future. Summary of the Final Report—Executive Summary, p.13.

http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf

Jane Knox

Residential Schools – References & further reading

(See also: <http://projectofheart.ca/1594-2/>)

Apologies: <http://projectofheart.ca/apologies/>

By churches (1993 Anglican to 2009 Catholic) and Canadian Government 2008

Assimilation:

Canada, House of Commons Debates (9 May 1883), 1107–1108: <http://www.lawnow.org/indian-residential-schools-chronology/>

Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan: http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/residential_schools.html

King, David. (2006). *The Federal Government of Canada's Residential School System for Inuit: A Brief Report*. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Lafrance, Jean, and Collins, Don. *Residential schools and Aboriginal parenting: Voices of parents*. Native Social Work Journal. 2003, 4(1), pp.104-125. <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/thesecanada/vol2/OSUL/TC-OSUL-435.pdf>

List of residential schools: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=12;>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Indian_residential_schools_in_Canada

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Canada's residential schools: The Métis experience*. Final Report, Volume 3. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/Reports/Volume_3_Metis_English_Web.pdf

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<http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=4>

Wikipedia. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Indian_residential_school_system

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Bryce

By Saskatchewan Authors

Deerchild, Rosanna. (2015). *Calling down the sky*. Winnipeg: McNally Robinson.

Also take a few minutes and listen to Deerchild's mother speak during the launch of this new book of powerful poetry and hear Deerchild's moving reading of some excerpts: <http://youtu.be/-iCn88KEyHc>

Deiter, Constance. (1999). *From our mothers' arms: The intergenerational impact of residential schools in Saskatchewan*. Toronto: United Church Publishing House.

Jaine, Linda (Ed.). (1993). *Residential schools: The stolen years*. Saskatoon: University Extension Press.

For Children (please read it yourself first—every child has different needs)

Campbell, Nicola and LaFave, Kim (illust.). (2008). *Shin-chi's canoe*. Toronto: Groundwood Press/House of Ansa.

Jordan-Fenton, Christy and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton. (2011). *A Stranger at Home*. Toronto: Annick Press.

King, Thomas. (2007). *A coyote Columbus story*. Nanaimo: Strong Nations Publishing.

Current music expressing the emotions of parents and children

Cheryl Bear (Nadleh Whut'en, Carrier First Nation of North British Columbia): "A residential school song".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVhiangk2lk>

Elmer Crane. "Look what they done" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9emQAj8s94>

Video explaining long-term impact

Death at residential schools—Honourable Justice Sinclair (poor records); 2 testimonials to long-term impact of schools attended in 1960s. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FydIzkndA>