

History of Residential Schools in Canada

Background

For over 300 years, Europeans and Aboriginal peoples regarded one another as distinct nations. In war, colonists and Indians formed alliances, and in trade each enjoyed the economic benefits of co-operation. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, European hunger for land had expanded dramatically, and the economic base of the colonies shifted from fur to agriculture. Alliances of the early colonial era gave way, during the period of settlement expansion and nation-building, to direct competition for land and resources. Settlers began to view Aboriginal people as a “problem.”

The so-called “Indian problem” was the mere fact that Indians existed. They were seen as an obstacle to the spread of “civilization” – that is to say, the spread of European, and later Canadian, economic, social, and political interests. Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932, summed up the Government’s position when he said, in 1920, “I want to get rid of the Indian problem. [...] Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department.”

In 1844, the Bagot Commission produced one of the earliest official documents to recommend education as a means of ridding the Dominion of Indians. In this instance, the proposal concerned farm-based boarding schools placed far from parental influence.

The document was followed, in immediate successive decades, by others of similar substance: the Gradual Civilization Act (1857), an Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians (1869), and the Nicholas Flood Davin Report of 1879, which noted that "the industrial school is the principal feature of the policy known as that of 'aggressive civilization'." This policy dictated that: the Indians should, as far as practicable, "be consolidated on few reservations, and provided with 'permanent individual homes'; that the tribal relation should be abolished; that lands should be allotted in severalty and not in common; that the Indian should speedily become a citizen [...] enjoy the protection of the law, and be made amenable thereto; that, finally, it was the duty of the Government to afford the Indians all reasonable aid in their preparation for citizenship by educating them in industry and in the arts of civilization."

A product of the times, Davin disclosed in this report the assumptions of his era – that 'Indian culture' was a contradiction in terms, Indians were uncivilized, and the aim of education must be to destroy the Indian. In 1879 he returned from his tour of the United States' Industrial Boarding Schools, or the handling of the 'Indian problem,' with a recommendation to Canada's Minister of the Interior – John A. Macdonald – of industrial boarding schools.

Establishment & Closure

The intent of the residential school system was to educate, assimilate, and integrate Aboriginal people into European-Canadian society. In the words of one government official, it was a system designed 'to kill the Indian in the child.' The earliest was the Mohawk Indian Residential School, opened in 1831 at Brantford, Ontario. The schools existed in almost all provinces and territories. In the North, the residential school system also took the form of hostels and tent camps.

The federal government currently recognizes that 132 federally-supported residential schools existed across Canada. This number does not recognize those residential schools that were administered by provincial / territorial governments and churches. At its peak in the early 1930s, it was a state-sponsored, church-run network of 80 schools with an enrollment of over 17,000.

In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, the bureaucrat in charge of Canada's Indian Policy, revised the Indian Act to make attendance at residential school mandatory for all children up to age 15. Very gradually, the Residential School System was discarded in favour of a policy of integration. Aboriginal students began in the 1940s to attend mainstream schools.

The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development assumed full management of the residential school system on April 1, 1969. Throughout the 1970s, at the request of the National Indian Brotherhood, federal government undertook a process that saw the eventual transfer of education management to Aboriginal people. In 1970, Blue

Quills Residential School became the first residential school managed by Aboriginal people. The last federally-administered residential school closed in 1996.

Conditions & Mistreatment

Attendance at residential schools was mandatory for Aboriginal children across Canada, and failure to send children to residential school often resulted in the punishment of parents, including imprisonment. Many Aboriginal children were taken from their homes, often forcibly removed, and separated from their families by long distances. Others who attended residential schools near their communities were often prohibited from seeing their families outside of occasional permitted visits.

Broad occurrences of disease, hunger, and overcrowding were noted by Government officials as early as 1897. In 1907 Indian Affairs' chief medical officer, P.H. Bryce, reported a death toll among the schools' children ranging from 15-24% – and rising to 42% in Aboriginal homes, where sick children were sometimes sent to die. In some individual institutions, for example Old Sun's school on the Blackfoot reserve, Bryce found death rates which were significantly higher.

Though some students have spoken of the positive experiences of residential schools and of receiving an adequate education, the quality of education was low in comparison to non-Aboriginal schools. In 1930, for instance, only 3 of 100 Aboriginal students managed to advance past grade 6, and

few found themselves prepared for life after school – on the reservation or off.

As late as 1950, according to an Indian Affairs study, over 40 per cent of the teaching staff had no professional training. This is not to say that past experiences were all negative, or that the staff were all bad. Such is not the case. Many good and dedicated people worked in the system. Indeed, their willingness to work long hours in an atmosphere of stress and for meagre wages was exploited by an administration determined to minimize costs. The staff not only taught, they also supervised the children's work, play, and personal care. Their hours were long, the pay below that of other educational institutions, and the working conditions exasperating.

In the early 1990s, beginning with Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Survivors came forward with disclosures that included:

- sexual abuse
- beatings
- punishments for speaking Aboriginal languages
- forced eating of rotten food
- widespread hunger and thirst
- bondage and confinement
- forced labour

Students were forbidden to speak their language or practice their culture, and were often punished for doing so. Other

experiences reported from Survivors of residential schools include mental abuse, severe punishments, overcrowding, use of students in medical experiments, illness and disease, and in some cases death. Generations of Aboriginal people today recall memories of trauma, neglect, shame, and poverty. Those traumatized by their experiences in the residential school have suffered pervasive loss: loss of identity, loss of family, loss of language, loss of culture.

Intergenerational Impacts

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children were often away from their parents for long periods of time and this prevented the discovering and learning of valuable parenting skills. The removal of children from their homes also prevented the transmission of language and culture, resulting in many Aboriginal people who do not speak their traditional language and/or who are not familiar with their culture.

Adaptation of abusive behaviours learned from residential school has also occurred and caused intergenerational trauma – the cycle of abuse and trauma from one generation to the next. Research on intergenerational transmission of trauma makes it clear that individuals who have suffered the effects of traumatic stress pass it on to those close to them and generate vulnerability in their children. The children in turn experience their own trauma.

The system of forced assimilation has had consequences which are with Aboriginal people today. The need for healing

does not stop with the school Survivors - intergenerational effects of trauma are real and pervasive and must also be addressed.

Healing & Reconciliation

In the early 1990s, beginning with Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Survivors came forward with disclosures about physical and sexual abuse at residential schools. Throughout the 1990s, these reports escalated and more Aboriginal victims from one end of the country to the other courageously came forward with stories. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) confirmed a link between social crisis in Aboriginal communities, residential schools, and the legacy of intergenerational trauma.

Aboriginal people have begun to heal the wounds of the past. On January 7, 1998, the Federal Government of Canada issued a Statement of Reconciliation and unveiled a new initiative called Gathering Strength—Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan. A strategy to begin the process of reconciliation, Gathering Strength featured the announcement of a \$350 million healing fund.

On March 31, 1998, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) was created. It was given ten years to disburse this \$350-million fund beginning March 31, 1999 and ending March 31, 2009. In 2007, the AHF received \$125M from the federal government extending the life of the Foundation to 2012. Since

June 1999, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has been providing funding support to community-based initiatives that address the intergenerational legacy of physical and sexual abuse in Canada's Indian Residential School System. In 2000, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation established the Legacy of Hope Foundation - a national charity whose mandate is to educate and create awareness about residential schools and to continue to support the ongoing healing of Survivors.

Through initiatives by groups such as the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and the Legacy of Hope Foundation, Canadians are learning this history and understanding the impact that it has had and continues to have on their communities. The AHF's vision is one in which those affected by the legacy of physical abuse and sexual abuse experienced in the residential school system have addressed the effects of unresolved trauma in meaningful terms, have broken the cycle of abuse, and have enhanced their capacity as individuals, families, communities, and nations to sustain their well-being and that of future generations.

Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement

While the strides that have been made in the healing process for school Survivors are extensive, it must be remembered that healing does not stand as the only action being taken.

Compensation for the suffering is also a component of the restitution that is being made to Survivors and their families.

In 2007, the Government of Canada implemented the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement. The

settlement agreement included: Common Experience Payment (CEP) to all surviving former students of federally-administered residential schools; the Independent Assessment Process (IAP) to address compensation for physical and sexual abuse; establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; healing initiatives; and a fund for commemoration projects. These were established in order to move ahead in addressing the long-standing and destructive legacy of the Indian Residential School System, which includes lateral violence, suicide, poverty, alcoholism, lack of parenting skills, weakening or destruction of cultures and languages, and lack of capacity to build and sustain healthy families and communities.

The Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established with a mandate to inform all Canadians about what happened in residential schools. The TRC will document the truth of Survivors, their families, communities and anyone personally affected by the residential school experience. The TRC hopes to guide and inspire First Nations, Inuit, Métis peoples, and all Canadians in a process of truth and healing leading toward reconciliation and renewed relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.

Church & Government of Canada Apologies

By the year 2008, most of the church denominations that were responsible for the operation of the residential schools in Canada had publicly apologized for their role in the neglect, abuse, and suffering of the children placed in their care. Most

of these organizations apologized through their national offices, except for the Catholic Church who left it up to individual dioceses to make apologies.

- United Church of Canada (1986)
- Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (Roman Catholic) (1991)
- Anglican Church (1993)
- Presbyterian Church (1994)
- Government of Canada (2008)
- Roman Catholic Church (2009)

In June of 2008, the Federal Government of Canada also apologized for their historical role in the residential school system. By saying 'we are sorry,' Prime Minister Stephen Harper acknowledged the Canadian government's role in a century of isolating native children from their homes, families, and cultures. Harper called residential schools a sad chapter in Canadian history and indicated that the policies that supported and protected the system were harmful and wrong.

For the thousands of survivors watching from across Canada, the government's apology was an historic occasion, though the response was mixed. The Aboriginal leaders who heard the apology from the floor of the House of Commons called it a 'positive step forward' 'even though the pain and scars are still there.'

Most believe there is still much to be done. "The full story of the residential school system's impact on our people has yet to be told," said Grand Chief Edward John of the First Nations

Summit, an umbrella group of B.C. First Nations.

Abuse Survivor Charlie Thompson watched the apology from the House gallery and said he felt relieved to hear the Prime Minister acknowledge the horrible legacy. "Today I feel relief. I feel good. For me, this is a historical day."

Healing Movement & Cultural Revitalization

Much progress has been made in the healing movement. This progress is the result of the hard work, dedication, and commitment of thousands of individuals in hundreds of communities.

Many Aboriginal people sought out knowledge holders in other communities near and far to revive traditional spirituality, and to re-introduce healing practices like smudging, the sweat lodge, the use of the sacred pipe, fasting, vision quests, and ceremonies for naming, healing, and reconciliation. At times, these practices conflicted with Christian teachings that had become a part of some Native communities, but efforts were made to find common ground.

Mainstream perspectives on health and healing began to change, and this led to a movement that centred on health promotion and healthy communities. In 1978, the World Health Organization defined health as "not only the absence of disease" but also as sharing control over those things which led to health, a view in harmony with traditional Aboriginal concepts of healing. Holistic approaches to health, which emphasize healthy lifestyles, relationships, and communities, together with personal growth programs and traditional

spirituality and healing practices have all contributed to the efforts to heal the intergenerational impacts of residential schools.

Today the schools have all been closed and much has been done to try and repair the damages caused to generations of Aboriginal peoples. Healing agencies and government support have been provided. Both the church groups who ran the schools and the Government of Canada have offered apologies for the damage that they knowingly inflicted on the innocent children in their care. Monies have been made available for compensation to the victims of abuse.

Though it will be many years before the healing is complete, it is important that all Canadians know that this is an era that will never be repeated.