

# Residential Schools in Canada: History, Healing and Hope

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## **Abstract**

Residential Schools in Canada were created to assimilate native children into Canadian culture. Native traditions, languages and lifestyles were systematically obliterated via prescribed curriculum, punitive educational practices and rampant physical, emotional, spiritual and sexual abuse inflicted upon them. The lingering effects of such atrocities (alarmingly high suicide rates, alcohol and drug addiction and feelings of negative self-worth) have plagued subsequent generations of Aboriginal people in Canada. A residential school survivor's testimonial helps contextualize the horrors experienced by thousands of children. The paper concludes with the steps undertaken by native groups across Canada that hope to address, via traditional healing methods, the residual effects of such a legacy of pain.

**Keywords:** Residential Schools, History, Canada, and Education

From their inception, residential schools were established in Canada to systematically obliterate Native culture. The long-term effects of such schools have deeply and negatively impacted generations of Aboriginal people. This paper will briefly examine the history of residential schools in Canada, will touch upon the prolonged effects of a legacy of abuse and neglect, and will offer hope for survivors through traditional and conventional healing processes.

## **1. A Brief History of Residential Schools in Canada**

### *1.1 1830-1890*

In 1830, the Mohawk Institute, or “Mechanics Institute,” was established in Ontario to provide manual training and education for Native youth (Grant, 1996).

In 1845, a government report to the legislative assembly of Upper Canada recommended that Indian boarding schools be established (Kuran, 2003).

In the spring of 1847, the legislative assembly suggested that residential schools be set up as a partnership between the government and church. Education for Native children would be of a religious nature (Kuran, 2003).

Protestants, in 1880, condemned the Catholic system of Indian education and moved to create a federally run, compulsory school system for Native children (Grant, 1996). At the turn of the century, direct funding to the missions was halted. Laws were enacted and passed to withhold rations from parents who did not send their children to school. During this time, Natives were forced on to federally allotted parcels of land (Reserves). Native families became dependent on the government for their sustenance. At this point, there were 39 residential schools in full operation. Native students were beginning to feel a sense of separation from both the schools they were forced to live in and their communities (Grant, 1996).

### *1.2 1901-Present*

In 1911, formal contracts were signed between the government and the churches regarding the establishment and administration of residential schools. Additional money was to be allotted for Industrial and boarding schools. Promises were made to improve school conditions. The schools would be subjected to increased governmental inspections to ensure that student needs were being met (Grant, 1996).

In 1920, an amendment to the Indian Act made education mandatory for children between the ages of 7 and 15. Truant officers were authorized to penalize parents who refused to make their children available for school (Grant, 1996).

In 1945, 9,149 Native students were enrolled in residential schools and only 100 students were enrolled over grade eight. There were no records kept of any students enrolled in school beyond grade nine (Kuran, 2003).

In 1950, over 40% of the teaching staff in residential schools had no professional experience or training whatsoever (Kuran, 2003).

In 1969, the formal partnership between the government and churches was dissolved. The federal government assumed full control of the residential schools in Canada. The total enrollment of Native students in residential schools was 7,704. Sixty percent of those students were then enrolled in the public school system (Kuran, 2003).

In 1970, Blue Quills Residential School was the first of the residential schools to come under the control of First Nations administrators (Grant, 1996).

In a landmark decision in 1973, the federal government of Canada agreed to allow Natives control over Native education (Grant, 1996).

The last government operated residential school (The McKay Residence, in Dauphin, Manitoba) closed its doors in 1988 (Grant, 1996).

A 1992 research study was conducted in British Columbia to examine the effects of residential schools on its students. A range of physical, sexual, and psychological abuses were then formally identified (Kuran, 2003).

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police created a Native Residential Schools Task Force in 1994 as a result of the research findings. Their mandate was to examine all of the residential schools in operation in Canada between 1890-1988 (Kuran, 2003).

In 1995, The Assembly of First Nations released its' report on the residential school experience entitled, "Breaking the Silence" (Kuran, 2003). Arthur Henry Plint, the former supervisor of the Alberta Indian Residential School (1948-1953 and 1963-1968) pleads guilty to 16 accounts of indecent assault in 1995. He was sentenced to 11 years in prison (Kuran, 2003).

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples final report was released in 1996. A public inquiry into the effects of residential schools on Canada's First Nation peoples was requested (Kuran, 2003).

In 1997, John Watson, the highest-ranking Indian Affairs official British Columbia, became the first government of Canada representative to readily admit that the residential schools were part of an assimilation policy of the Canadian government (Kuran, 2003). Moreover, in 1997, National Chief Phil Fontaine outlined the elements that The Assembly of First Nations would seek as part of a healing strategy on residential schools. This strategy included a full apology, an endowment fund, a language revival program, counselling for residential school survivors, and community healing programs (Kuran, 2003).

In January 1998, Jane Stewart, then Minister of Indian Affairs, made a statement of reconciliation wherein which she apologized to those survivors of residential schools who had experienced the horrific social, psychological, sexual, and physical abuse while under the care of residential schoolteachers and administrators (Kuran, 2003). A Healing Fund was announced to help address the legacy of abuse (Kuran, 2003).

## **2. The Residential School Experience - A Legacy of Pain and Suffering**

The great experiment of carrying out a program of cultural replacement and assimilation was willingly supported, both philosophically and financially, by the government of Canada (Wilson, as cited in Ing, 1991). The goal of the residential school program was to "civilize" Native children. The schools were established to deprive children of their Native languages, belittle and negate their familial ties, and rob them of the essence of who they were. Aboriginal children in residential schools were subjected to extreme degrees of cruelty. The brutality took the form of physical, emotional, spiritual, cultural, and sexual abuse.

Children were traumatized by the separation from their parents and once at the schools siblings were immediately separated. Children were forced to have their hair sheared and were issued prison-like uniforms. These uniforms were often rough and itchy and made of crude materials. The dormitories the children were herded into were cold and lacked proper ventilation. Diseases of all types ravaged the children. Vicious, and often arbitrary punishments were part of

the fabric of daily life. Children were routinely given public beatings for “misbehaving,” or speaking their language.

Dr. Robert Chrisjohn (1991) has identified a list of physical and sexual abuses suffered by Native children while in residential schools. These abuses are summarized and listed below.

### *2.1 Physical and Sexual Abuses*

- \* Sexual assault, including forced sexual intercourse between men or women in authority and girls and or boys in their charge.
- \* Forced oral and genital masturbatory contact
- \* Arranging or inducing abortions for female children impregnated by men in authority
- \* Forced sexual acts between children while authorities watched
- \* The burning or scolding of children
- \* Beating children into unconsciousness
- \* Using electric shock on children who were restrained
- \* Forcing children to eat their vomit
- \* Unprotected exposure to the elements
- \* Withholding much needed medical attention
- \* Children were beaten with: leather and rubber straps, straps with tacks, nails or wires embedded in them, boxing gloves, wooden boards, belts, sticks, classroom pointers, whips and horse harness straps

### *2.2 Psychological/Emotional Cultural Abuses*

- \* Administration of beatings to naked children before their peers and institutional officials
- \* Verbal abuse, belittling, threatening children
- \* Public, race-based vilification of all aspects of Aboriginal forms of life
- \* Withholding presents, letters, and other personal property of children
- \* Locking children in closets
- \* Proscription of the use of Aboriginal religious or spiritual practices
- \* Forced labour
- \* Children were forced to participate in the beatings of their peers
- \* Denying young women sanitary pads
- \* Forcing bedwetters to publicly parade around wearing soiled sheets

It is often the voices from the past that capture the real horrors experienced by Aboriginal children who were forced to endure life in a residential school. The following testimonial is just one of the many stories that continue to surface to this day about life in a residential school in Canada.

### 3. Testimonial of a Residential School Survivor

A haunting account of the abuses suffered at the hands of residential school oppressors has been presented by Dr. Eugene Norman (1998). Norman's testimonial captures the essence of the horrors experienced by those who were forced into residential schools. The following is an excerpt from this testimonial.

"I was taken to a "boarding school" run by Carmelite Brothers. They cut my hair. They did not give me a starched uniform. They did take my buckskins and gave me clothing fashioned out of burlap. It was dirty and itchy. I had run away the first night after I was brought there but was caught and beaten. There were other boys and girls there. Most were older than I and stronger. Our beds were made of burlap and straw. Mine was pretty thin. Survival of the fittest ruled. Sometimes a Brother would come in, select a boy or girl (most times a girl) and they would leave. One time a boy and a girl were having sex. They were caught at it by a Brother and taken from the room. The next morning we had to visit the school cemetery. There were two fresh mounds there.

We were fed three times a day. The food, most of the time, was a grainy porridge. Sometimes there were little worms in it and we would pick them out and make them crawl around the table. There was a raised platform at one end of the food hall. The Brothers ate there. Sometimes they would throw a chicken leg down to one of their favorites. If the wrong boy or girl grabbed it, he or she was beaten.

We were beaten for speaking our language, for recounting our heritage, for not responding quickly enough in class, for not scrubbing the floor hard enough, for not working hard enough in the fields, for crying, or just at the whim of a Brother. All the beatings were with bullwhips. I still have scars from these beatings, both physical and emotional.

I learned Latin, Greek and Hebrew as well as English. I learned History from the European perspective, Geography, Mathematics and the other subjects normal to Stateside High Schools. We learned shop skills only as necessary to fix things up at the school. Our physical education was the work assignments. As I grew older, a girl (one of the Brother's castoffs) decided to sleep with me. Up to that time, I had slept alone and was always cold. The warmth of her body was glorious."

Norman (1998) noted that recanting his abuses and experiences was one of the most painful experiences of his life. His hope was to connect with other survivors and to inform those who are unaware of these schools. The impact of abuses experienced by the Native children is enduring and heartbreaking.

### 4. Impact of Abuse

The impact of such abuse has left a profound and lasting effect on Canada's Native peoples. Natives suffer from the highest rates of unemployment, poverty, alcoholism and suicide (Heart & Debryn, 1998). According to the Assembly of First Nations (1995) and the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation (1995, as cited in Claes & Clifton, 2003) the most significant outcome of the residential school experience on multiple generations of people include: loss of meaning in life; loss of community and identity; a loss in confidence; impairment of parenting and life skills, loss of family; loss of culture, language, and pride; a loss in trust for others; a loss in morality and self-control; a feeling of inferiority; complete demoralization; a dependency on non-Native

society; learning that violence is acceptable; becoming racist ;difficulty in making decisions; recurring nightmares; addictions to alcohol, drugs, food, and gambling; apathy; anger towards churches and the dominant society; and passing on all negative traits to their children

Tragically, the residential school experience continues to affect the families of residential school survivors and subsequent generations of Aboriginal people. The cycle of pain and its impact is still, quite understandably, evident. According to Middleton-Moz (1995, as cited in Haig-Brown), Cultural Self-Hatred is a mindset wherein people grow up hearing and believing the negative stereotypes about their personal and cultural backgrounds. It includes a dimension of self-helplessness whereby an individual or group believes that no matter what they do, they cannot make a difference in their own lives and those around them. The struggle to ease the deeply entrenched feelings of self-loathing and cultural inferiority that have been impressed upon generations of Canada's Native peoples is a daunting task. The healing process is in its infancy.

## **5. Healing and Hope**

Healing must begin with the individual and include all members of the community. In "Breaking the Silence," (1994) The Assembly of First Nations provided a comprehensive list of recommendations that requires the participation of generations of family members. The summarized recommendations include:

- 1) A commitment to the principles of respect, responsibility, and cooperation between all those involved in the healing process.
- 2) Effective involvement of all community members with a special emphasis on respect for the needs of the individual and family within the larger community.
- 3) The effort must be community-driven to ensure ownership and responsibility.
- 4) The need for a healing model that is unique and mindful to the First Nations perspective. This model focuses on the interconnectedness of family and community. Healing must address the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of the individual, family and community.
- 5) A need to understand history from a First Nations perspective by turning to elders and drawing on traditional knowledge and practices of healing and living that have been in practice for many years.
- 6) Opportunities to both revive and maintain First Nations languages to help build the collective spirit of the community.
- 7) An ongoing effort towards the treatment of addictions that have plagued the Native community. Particular focus will be directed toward youth and young adults.
- 8) Additional suggestions for healing also include the development of policing and judicial systems culturally appropriate to First Nations peoples. An urgent need for the creation of family counselling programs that focus on ongoing treatment for both victims and offenders is crucial.
- 9) Canada's Native peoples need opportunities to learn a wide variety of skills that are necessary for improved familial communication, parenting skills, and job skills.
- 10) A full acknowledgement, both individually and communally, must take place in the recognition of multi-generational losses Canada's Native people have experienced. Addressing the issues of grief and loss is an integral part in the healing process.
- 11) Addressing family violence and grief presupposes the development of individual and communal healing.

A concerted effort by Native leaders has opened the door for the healing of generations of people affected by the systemic mistreatment of its peoples. Given time, faith, and understanding, centuries of open wounds will begin to heal. There is hope that Canada's Aboriginal peoples will flourish again.

Canada's Natives, despite all efforts, have not gone away. The legacy of abuse and mistreatment that they were subjected to through state-sanctioned residential schools has been well documented. The effects of such cruelty are equally apparent. The cycle of violence, poverty, addictions, and self-hatred continue to linger. But there is hope. Hope in the form of a community of people coming together to grieve and grow. Canada's Native peoples are unified in their adversity and strengthened by their collective will to recapture their culture and traditional ways of life.

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