



16 First Nation Trustees: Leading in Two Worlds

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Overview

Traditionally, Aboriginal children begin their education at birth, when they learn how to be members of their communities. Their parents, Elders, traditions and ceremonies play a significant role in helping them develop the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of their identities. Contrary to the European model of corporal punishment, native education favours guidance and mentoring, an approach that respects the integrity and sanctity of the child. The three “L”s of Looking, Listening, and Learning also emphasize experiential learning, and storytelling conveys cautionary messages meant to regulate behaviour.

Residential schools considered part of the Residential School System were set up beginning in the early 1800s and continued until the 1990s. They were run by churches in conjunction with the federal government and used to educate and assimilate First Nation, Métis and Inuit children. Some residential school survivors report positive learning experiences in the residential schools they attended. However, the more dominant experience is that residential schools were often the setting for horrendous abuses for which the federal government apologized in 2008. These abuses and the attack on Aboriginal cultures have had negative multi-generational impacts which continue to devastate individuals, families and communities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established as a result of the 2007 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and began hearing testimony about the abuses in 2009.

History

- Between 1831 and 1969, residential schools operated in Canada through arrangements between the Government of Canada and the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, United and Presbyterian churches. This partnership ended in 1969, with the Government of Canada taking over the management of residential schools and beginning to transfer control to Indian bands.
- In 1831, the oldest residential school considered part of the Residential School System as defined by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement opened in Brantford, Ontario.

- Residential schools had one common objective—the religious and linguistic assimilation of Aboriginal children. Unlike the Aboriginal people in the east who were in the process of being assimilated into mainstream culture to varying degrees, the western tribal groups maintained their autonomous ways of life.
- In the early decades of Confederation, two pieces of legislation were enacted: the Act for the Gradual Civilization of the Indian (1869), which called for “All Indians to be civilized,” and the Indian Act (1876), which legally established the federal government’s right to create laws that would apply to Aboriginal peoples. With such legislative groundwork established, a case was soon after made to develop an educational strategy that would completely assimilate Aboriginal children.
- In 1879, the Davin Report, written by Nicholas Flood Davin who visited American residential schools at the request of Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonal, recommended the creation of a system of industrial schools where children could be intentionally separated from their parents to reduce the influence of the “wigwam.”
- By 1896, there were 45 residential/industrial schools are operating in Canada. By 1900, there were 73 schools in operation.
- The government began to hear many serious and legitimate complaints from parents and native leaders. Teachers were under-qualified, with an emphasis on religious zeal. Religious instruction was divisive, and there were allegations of physical and sexual abuse. School administrators, teachers, Indian agents, and even some government bureaucrats started to express their concerns. All of them called for major reforms to the system. Government and church officials ignored these complaints. However, ongoing outbreaks of tuberculosis at the schools were taking a toll on the students’ lives. Thousands of residential school children died from tuberculosis and from the many other ailments they contracted at the schools.
- Many children died before the government finally intervened in 1907 by sending Dr. Peter Bryce, the Medical Inspector for the Department of Indian Affairs, to assess the health situation at the schools. In his official report, Bryce called the tuberculosis epidemic a ‘national crime’.
- Severe and chronic underfunding led to continually poor learning and working conditions for students and staff.
- In 1939 The Supreme Court of Canada determined that Inuit were to be “classified” as Indian and that the departments that managed northern affairs would also manage Inuit affairs. Residential schools were established in the north, where the majority of students came from remote communities and were boarded at hostels next to the schools.
- By 1940, the federal government began to apply provincial curriculum standards to residential schools and to integrate Aboriginal students into regular schools.
- By the 1950s, it became obvious that the residential school program had failed to reach its goals: Aboriginal peoples had not been assimilated into the Canadian mainstream, and graduates were not succeeding in their vocations. A policy of integration was now proposed as the best way to proceed, and as the residential school curriculum was reformed to meet national standards, the schools were slowly replaced by day schools.

- Escalating social problems in Aboriginal communities brought to light the destructive legacy of the residential school experience.
- In the 1960s, with the guidance of Elders, Aboriginal teachings and cultural practices re-emerged in some communities where these were lost or difficult to practice. Many Aboriginal people sought out knowledge holders in their own and other communities near and far to revive traditional spirituality and to re-introduce healing.
- Between 1986 and 1994, the United Church, the Catholic Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Anglican Church, and the Presbyterian Church issued formal apologies for their participation in the residential school system.
- The last federally-run residential school, Gordon Indian Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, closed in 1996.
- Survivors and advocate groups pressured the government to address survivor concerns and numerous class action lawsuits were initiated. After negotiation with key Aboriginal groups and representatives, the Government of Canada implemented the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement in 2007. The agreement provided for restitution and redress through a number of financial initiatives and programs. Processes for the resolution of claims and for the reimbursement of legal expenses were established, and funds were allotted for healing and commemoration initiatives like those conducted on the National Day of Reconciliation.
- In 2009, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was begun. It heard the testimony of more than 6,000 residential school survivors. Its final report was released in June 2015.

“I say the prayers with [youth] and I talk about Residential Schools with them. I don’t talk about all my experiences, but I do say that I have been to Residential School so maybe youth will understand. They are struggling with a lot of issues, the youth are, and one is identity and self-esteem and being proud of who they are. It hasn’t been passed on from their parents because of Residential School. So I see the younger generation struggling with that, not knowing who they are and not knowing how to be in the world, you know. . . . That’s our belief as First Nations that we don’t just think about ourselves. We have to think of the next generation and the ones yet to come. I’ll end with that. We have to think about the ones yet to come. They’re not here yet, but we have to prepare for them. And preparing means we’ve got to put down that hurt and that pain we carry now. We can’t let that be our life.”

VIOLA PAPEQUASH, SURVIVOR OF GORDON’S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL, PUNNICHY, SASKATCHEWAN

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