The Residential School System as defined by the federal government is limited to 139 schools that operated across Canada between 1831 and 19961. This definition is controversial and excludes provincially-administered schools, as well as hostels and day schools. Residential schools existed in almost all provinces and territories, and in the North also took the form of hostels and tent camps. The earliest recognized and longest-running Indian Residential School was the Mohawk Institute, in Brantford, Ontario, which operated from 1831 to 1962. The last federally-run Indian Residential School, Gordon's School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, closed in 1996, and was subsequently demolished, marking the end of the residential school era.[2]

Background

For over 300 years, European settlers and Indigenous peoples co-existed in a harmonious, if sometimes precarious, relationship. In war, colonists and First Nations formed alliances, and in trade each enjoyed the economic benefits of co-operation. By the mid-19th century, however, expansionist policies increased westward settlement, and alliances of the early colonial era gave way to direct competition for land and resources. In the face of ensuing conflicts, the confederation government of Sir John A. Macdonald came to view First Nations and Métis as serious impediments to nation-building. Even as treaties to make large tracts of land available for settlement were being negotiated with First Nations, a national policy was being developed "to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion, as speedily as they are fit for the change."[3] The Residential School System was to become a key feature of this endeavour.

In 1844, the Bagot Commission produced one of the earliest official documents to recommend education as a means of assimilating the Indian population. The commission proposed implementing a system of farm-based boarding schools situated far from parental influence–the separation of children from their parents being touted as the best means by which to sustain their civilizing effects.[4] The Nicholas Flood Davin Report of 1879 recommended the establishment of a residential industrial school system as the means by which to "aggressively civilize" First Nations children. Davin's recommendations reflected the widely-held opinion that "Indian culture" was a contradiction in terms, Indians were uncivilized, and the aim of education must be to destroy the Indian in the child.[5]

A number of industrial schools were established in this era, laying the foundation upon which the broader Residential School System emerged. At its peak in the early 1930s, 80 residential schools operated across Canada with an enrollment of over 17,000 students. Children as young as four and five years of age attended the schools and parents were often discouraged from visiting or bringing their children home for vacation. Many students did not return home for long periods of time (some for many years) and found themselves strangers to their communities upon their eventual reunion.

Very gradually, beginning in the 1940s, the residential schools were shut down and Aboriginal students began to attend mainstream day schools. Day schools had existed for Aboriginal children in tandem with residential schools, but policy shifts favoured the integration of Aboriginal children with their non-Aboriginal peers. Despite this, residential schools continued to be established in the North during this period. Throughout the 1970s, at the request of the National Indian Brotherhood, the federal government undertook a process that saw the eventual transfer of education management to Aboriginal peoples.[6]

Anglican Mission School Aklavik, N.W.T., 1941
Photographer: M. Meikle
Library and Archives Canada, PA-101771.

Conditions and Mistreatment

Through an amendment to the *Indian Act* in 1920, attendance at residential schools was made mandatory for Indian, and later Inuit and Métis, children seven to fifteen years of age, and failure to send children to residential school often resulted in the punishment, including imprisonment, of parents.[7] Many Aboriginal children were taken from their homes, often forcibly removed, and separated from their families by long distances. Often, even those children who attended residential schools near their communities were prohibited from seeing their families outside of occasional visits.

Broad occurrences of disease, hunger, and overcrowding were noted by government officials as early as 1897. In 1907, Indian Affairs' chief medical officer, Dr. 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 the Old Sun school on the Blackfoot reserve, Bryce found death rates significantly higher.[8]

Although 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 six, and few found themselves prepared for life after school–on the reserve or off. As late as 1950, according to an Indian Affairs study, over 40% of the teaching staff had no professional training. This is not to say that experiences were all negative, or that the staff was all bad–many good and dedicated people worked within the System. The staff not only taught, they also supervised the children's work, play, and personal care. Their hours were long, the pay was below that of other educational institutions, and the working conditions were exasperating.

In the early 1990s, 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; and forced labour. Students were forbidden to speak their language or practice their traditional 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.

Intergenerational Impacts

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children were often separated from their parents for long periods of time, living in an institutional rather than a family home environment. This impeded the transfer of valuable parenting skills. The isolation of children from their families and communities also thwarted the transmission of language and culture, resulting in significant cultural loss.

Adaptation of abusive behaviours learned while attending residential school has also resulted in intergenerational trauma–the cycle of abuse and trauma that passes from one generation to the next. That is not to say that all families and communities were affected in this way. Nor were all Survivors compromised by their experiences in residential schools. Research makes it clear however, that individuals who have suffered traumatic stress generate vulnerability in their children who in turn experience their own trauma. The system of forced assimilation has consequences that persist among Aboriginal peoples and communities today. The need for healing does not stop with the Survivors–intergenerational effects of trauma are real and pervasive and must also be addressed.

Redress & Reconciliation

Escalating social problems in Aboriginal communities, and conflict between Aboriginal groups and the federal government in the mid-1990s, brought greater attention and focus to the destructive legacy of the residential school experience. Aboriginal leaders also helped to begin a dialogue between Survivors, the federal government, and the Canadian public. In this climate of disclosure and dialogue, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was created. On January 7, 1998, in response to RCAP's five-volume report that revealed an overwhelming link between the social crisis in Aboriginal communities and the Residential School System, the federal government 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 healing fund, which was granted to the newly created Aboriginal Healing Foundation, to support community-based healing projects that address the legacy of physical and sexual abuse at residential schools.

In 2007, the Government of Canada implemented the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). The Settlement Agreement included the Common Experience Payment (CEP) to all living former students of federally administered residential schools; the Independent Assessment Process (IAP) to address compensation for sexual abuse, serious physical abuse, and other wrongful acts; establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; healing initiatives; and a fund for commemoration projects.[9]

By 2008, most of the church denominations 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.[10] In June 2008, the 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 over a century of isolating Aboriginal children from their families, communities, 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 responses were mixed.

A Group of Nuns with Aboriginal Students, ca. 1890
Library and Archives Canada, PA-123707.

Healing Movement and Cultural Revitalization

Many Survivors have turned to a combination of Western therapies and traditional practices to heal. Talking circles, sweats, storytelling, ceremonies, fasts, feasts, and vision quests reconnect Survivors to their cultures and to themselves. On-the-land activities such as trapping, hunting, fishing, and gathering medicinal plants and wild foods also renew the spirit. All of these practices assist in re-enforcing and celebrating Aboriginal identities. Healing is a long-term process that occurs in stages, starting with the individual Survivor and expanding to include the whole community. The intergenerational impacts of the Residential School System–the legacy of poverty, ineffective parenting, abuse, grief, and health issues–can appear throughout the entire community, not just in the lives of the Survivors.

Healing in Aboriginal communities is affected by a community's level of understanding and awareness about the impact of the Residential School System, by the number of community members who are involved in healing, and by the availability of programs and services.

Much progress has been made as a result of the healing movement. It is the result of hard work, dedication, and commitment of thousands of individuals in hundreds of communities. Many Aboriginal people sought out knowledge holders to revive traditional spirituality and to reintroduce healing practices. Holistic approaches to health which emphasize healthy lifestyles, relationships, and communities–together with personal growth programs, traditional spirituality, and healing practices have all contributed to the efforts of healing.

Shade Branson Kaiser of M'Chigeeng, FN in Ontario.
Photographer: V. Candace Kaiser

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