

Background to residential schools



Background Briefs

Historic injustices and redress in Canada



Residential school students taking part in a class in penmanship at the Red Deer Industrial School (1914 or 1919).
Source: "Looking Unto Jesus." United Church of Canada, Archives, 93.049P/850N.

Historical context

Before 1500 CE, Aboriginal societies in the Americas and societies in Europe developed separately from one another and were largely unaware of one another's existence. Encounters between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples began to increase in the 1500s. Early contact was largely characterized by:

- mutual interest and curiosity;
- gradual increase in the exchange of goods;
- barter, trade deals, friendships, intermarriage, all of which created bonds between individuals and families;
- military and trade alliances, which encouraged bonds between and among nations.

While the early relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples was more or less equal, this began to change in the 1800s. As the number of settlers increased, their power began to grow. As European settlers dominated the land, they also began to dominate its original inhabitants. Colonial and Canadian governments

established reserves of land for Aboriginal people. Sometimes without treaty arrangements, these reserves generally lacked adequate resources and were often small in size. Increasingly, European settlers in Canada brought with them the belief that their own civilization was superior and had reached the pinnacle (height) of human achievement. They began to believe that the cultural differences between themselves and Aboriginal peoples proved that European civilization was superior, and that it was the responsibility of Europeans to provide guidance to the "ignorant and child-like savages." In other words, they felt the need to "civilize" the Aboriginal peoples. Education became the primary strategy to achieve this goal. Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, advocated a policy of "aggressive civilization" which led to public funding for the residential school system.

Details about residential schools

In 1849, the first of what would become a network of residential schools for Aboriginal children was opened in Alderville, Ontario. Church and government leaders concluded that the problem of "Aboriginal savagery" needed to be solved. This would be done by taking children from their families and communities at an early age, and teaching them the culture of the dominant society during eight or nine years of residential schooling. The main goal of the residential school system was to assimilate (absorb) and integrate Aboriginal people into Canadian society.

These photos portray the words of one government official who said that the residential school system was designed "to kill the Indian in the child."

With the passage of the *Indian Act* in 1876, residential schools became active. The federal government and churches operated over 130 residential schools across Canada. Attendance at residential schools was mandatory for Aboriginal children across Canada. Parents could be punished (and even imprisoned) for not sending children to these schools. Children were placed in schools far away from their parents and communities as part of a strategy to alienate (separate) them from their families and culture. Many Aboriginal children were taken from their homes by force. Those that attended residential schools near their communities were only occasionally allowed to visit their families, if at all. Students were not permitted to speak their language or practise their culture. If they did, they were often severely punished for doing so. There was a lack of nutritious food and many students were forced to do manual labour. Survivors of residential schools have reported that they experienced sexual and mental abuse, beatings and severe punishments. Overcrowded living conditions were common and children were forced to sleep outside in winter. Some reported cruel and inhumane punishments such as forcing children to wear soiled underwear on their head. Students suffered diseases and, in some cases, died while in residential schools. The last federally administered residential school was not closed until 1996.

Significance of residential schools

There were 132 federally-supported residential schools across Canada. This number does not include residential schools that were administered by provincial/territorial governments and churches. Approximately 80,000 survivors of these schools are alive today. As indicated by various statements



Thomas Moore before and after his entrance into the Regina Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan in 1874.
Source: Library and Archives Canada / NL-022474.

of apology issued by the churches and by the Canadian government, students received a sub-standard education and most suffered extremely negative experiences.

In many cases, the abuses, and hardships associated with attending residential school have caused impacts such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Many survivors have struggled to engage in family, social and professional activities. Being away from their parents for long periods of time, survivors were not able to discover and learn valuable parenting skills. Taking children from their homes meant that transmission of language and culture was denied. As a result, many Aboriginal people no longer speak their native languages or are aware of their traditional cultural practices. Abusive behaviours learned from residential school have resulted in a cycle of abuse and trauma passed from one generation to the next. As a result, Aboriginal communities continue to experience some of the highest rates of substance abuse, violence, crime, disease and suicide in Canada.

