

CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL APOLOGY

Introduction

Focus

For over 100 years Aboriginal children were taken from their families and shipped off to residential schools where the goal was to “kill the Indian in the child.” This *News in Review* story examines the history and legacy of residential schools as well as the apology delivered to the Aboriginal community by the Prime Minister on behalf of all Canadians.

Definition

Assimilation means to absorb a minority group into a majority group by having the minority group accept the culture and characteristics of the majority culture. This may be done peacefully or forcibly.

Imagine you are just six years old when an agent of the government arrives at your door and tells you to pack your things because he is taking you away to school. Your parents look away, knowing that the law of the land gives the agent the authority to take you. You are confused but comply and are taken to a faraway place where you are forbidden to speak your native language or demonstrate any aspects of your heritage. Instead you are subject to a foreign curriculum with a religious emphasis that is a far cry from what your parents and grandparents would have taught you. But this is not the worst of this imaginary scene. Imagine having no one to turn to when you are afraid. Imagine seeing your friend beaten for no reason at all. Imagine seeing a friend taken away by an adult and then imagine a profound look of distress on their face when they return. Next, imagine you are the one who is beaten and you are the one who is taken away by the adult. If you can harness the power of your own sense of empathy and truly feel what was imagined above then you have caught a glimpse of what it was like for many Aboriginal students who attended residential schools in Canada.

For over 100 years, Aboriginal children were taken from their parents and shipped off to Indian Residential Schools. Over 150 000 students attended Canada's residential schools from the 1870s into the 1970s. The majority of schools were run by religious organizations. Their goal was to “kill the Indian in the child.” Mainstream Canadians saw themselves as superior to their Aboriginal counterparts and exercised that superiority in a variety of different ways. The schools were poorly built, maintained, and equipped. The curriculum was designed to assimilate Aboriginal children into mainstream culture and turn them into labourers.

Some critics have called this process attempted genocide. On another even more sinister level, the students were devalued as people at every turn. Some students were beaten for speaking in native dialects. Others were beaten for not paying attention in class. Many others were beaten for no reason at all. And, tragically, some schools became a haven for sexual deviants who preyed on the children to satisfy their perverse desire for power and domination.

For the most part, Aboriginal students did not bring these abuses to the attention of the authorities. Why would they? The government's plan to assimilate First Nations children into mainstream culture was a policy that many Canadians either endorsed or didn't care about. Children who were beaten were not going to get the support of the school administration or the police because there was a commonly held opinion at the time that if children were beaten by an adult they must have done something to deserve it. In terms of sexual abuse, the children were caught in a trap; any accusation against a priest, nun, or teacher was likely to fall on deaf ears. A best-case scenario would see the accusation ignored; a worst-case scenario would mean an escalation in the abuse.

Students who graduated from Indian Residential Schools held onto or suppressed many of these painful memories until the abuse of children was thrust into the national spotlight. In 1989 Canadians learned that some Christian Brothers had been routinely abusing non-aboriginal orphan boys at Mount Cashel orphanage in St. John's, Newfoundland. A year later, Phil Fontaine, who would eventually lead the Assembly of First Nations, pointed the finger at the residential school system. He revealed that he had been physically and sexually abused when he was a student at a

Further Research

To understand more of this tragic story, consider a visit to the Web sites of The Assembly of First Nations (www.afn.ca), the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (www.aicn-inac.gc.ca), The Indian Residential School Agreement (www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca), the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission (www.trc-cvr.ca/indexen.html)

Did you know . . .

By the late 1970s most residential schools had closed down. The last school, which was almost completely First Nations run, was closed in 1996.

residential school. The tide was turning; no longer were residential school students willing to sit on their memories of abuse. They began to demand justice. Eventually, over 10 000 lawsuits were filed against the Canadian Government and the churches that ran the schools.

Litigation proceeded slowly, and the victims wondered if they would ever receive compensation for the abuse they suffered. In the meantime, even more disturbing details began to surface. Some schools tattooed their students with an identification number. When the tuberculosis epidemic struck Canada in the 1930s, sick students were not separated from healthy ones, leading to a disproportionate number of child deaths in the residential school system. How many died is uncertain because no one has been permitted full access to the school records. A dark chapter of Canadian history was slowly emerging, and people were shocked at its content.

The Canadian government eventually realized it could not stave off the lawsuits any longer. In 1998, the Liberals offered residential school students an apology for the abuses they suffered and the role the government played in establishing the schools. Many felt the apology did not go far enough. Negotiations were pursued in earnest at the turn of the century and, by 2006, an agreement between the residential school students, the government and the churches was struck. In the largest class-action lawsuit settlement in Canadian history, all residential schools students were to receive \$10 000 and an additional \$3 000 for each year they

were in school. This amounted to an average payout of about \$25 000 to the over 80 000 surviving residential school students. Those suffering emotional, physical, or sexual abuse could apply for more compensation, to a maximum of \$275 000. The government put aside \$2-billion to handle the costs of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA).

The IRSSA called for more than just compensation. It also called for the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission to unveil the history and legacy of the residential school system as well as a formal apology from the government in the House of Commons. In June 2008, the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission began its five-year mandate, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper stood in Parliament and issued the much-sought-after apology. “The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long,” he said to residential school students, some of whom were in the House to hear the apology. “The burden is properly ours as a government and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian residential school system to ever again prevail” (*The Hill Times*, June 16, 2008).

It is likely that every nation has something in its past that is shameful. The important thing is to learn from that sense of shame and to guarantee that attitudes change, society evolves, and the dignity of all citizens is maintained. Hopefully this will be the legacy of the residential school experience.

To Consider

1. Were you able to “imagine” the scenario put forth in the first paragraph? In two or three sentences, describe your reaction to the scenario.
2. What evidence is there in the article that supports the idea that Aboriginal children were seen as inferior by the people running residential schools?
3. Make a point-form list of the key components of the IRSSA.

CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL APOLOGY

Video Review

1. Why did Prime Minister Harper apologize to Aboriginal Canadians in the summer of 2008?

2. How many people attended residential schools over the course of their history? _____

3. What were residential schools designed to do? What did the government hope would happen to Aboriginal children as a result of their residential school experience?

4. a) Why do you think the government chose to separate Aboriginal children from their family and heritage?

b) How did the children react to being separated from their families? Provide an example from the documentary.

5. What evidence is there in the documentary that the goal of residential schools was to "destroy the Indian in the child"?

6. What effect did residential schools have on Aboriginal culture? Describe some of the negative social effects of the residential schools within the Aboriginal community.

CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL APOLOGY

Timeline

Read the following timeline and complete the activity that follows.

1620-1680 Catholic clergy establish the first boarding schools for Aboriginal youth in New France.

1820s Protestants, Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists begin to share responsibility for Aboriginal schools.

1847 Egerton Ryerson conducts a study of Aboriginal education for the superintendent of Indian affairs. His conclusions form the blueprint for future Indian residential schools. Ryerson recommends that Aboriginal youth be subject to a largely British, Christian curriculum with a focus on getting graduates ready to work in farming once they have completed school. The schools would be overseen by the government, with the religious denominations running the schools.

1860 Indian Affairs is transferred from Britain to the Province of Canada. The emphasis shifts from turning Aboriginals into farmers to assimilating them through education.

1931 Residential school education reaches its peak, with close to 130 schools operating across Canada.

1974 Band councils take over education programming in many residential schools. Staffing shifts away from the clergy as Aboriginals eventually comprise 34 per cent of residential school employees.

1975 Federal and provincial governments move away from residential schooling in favour of native-run schools.

1979 With only 15 residential schools still operating in Canada, the Department of Indian Affairs introduces initiatives to make the remaining schools more

culturally aware of the needs of Aboriginal students.

1986 The United Church of Canada formally apologizes to Canada's Aboriginal population for the role they played in running residential schools.

1989 Non-aboriginal orphans at Mount Cashel Orphanage in Newfoundland make allegations of sexual abuse against the Christian Brothers who ran their school. This case shines a spotlight on residential schools across Canada.

1990 Phil Fontaine, leader of the Association of Manitoba Chiefs, courageously shares his experience of physical and sexual abuse with the public. Later, he meets with representatives of the Catholic Church and demands that the church acknowledge the physical and sexual abuse suffered by students at residential schools.

1991-1994 The Roman Catholic order called the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Anglican and Presbyterian churches offer formal apologies to Canada's First Nations people for their role in administering residential schools.

1996 The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, or RCAP, makes over 400 recommendations designed to improve the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the federal and provincial governments. One chapter of the commission's report is dedicated to residential schools. In the same year, the last federally run residential school is shut down in Saskatchewan.

1997 Phil Fontaine is elected national chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

Archives

To see an audio-visual presentation on residential schools visit the CBC Digital Archives at www.cbc.ca/archives and explore the file "A lost heritage: Canada's residential schools."

January 7, 1998 The federal government introduces a comprehensive plan based largely on the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. The Government of Canada issues an apology to students who suffered physical and sexual abuse at residential schools as well as an apology for its role in the formation and administration of the schools.

2001 The federal government negotiates with the Anglican, Catholic, United, and Presbyterian churches to design a compensation plan for Aboriginal residential school students. Eventually, the government agrees to pay 70 per cent of the settlement costs to former students who can prove their claims.

2002-2003 The Presbyterian Church and Anglican Church agree to share compensation costs with the government for former students claiming sexual and physical abuse. The Catholic Church (which ran 70 per cent of the schools) does not agree to pay compensation. Instead, in 2008, they agree to give \$25-million to a healing and reconciliation fund.

May 30, 2005 Discussions begin between the federal government and Aboriginal leaders to find a fair and lasting settlement to the residential school issue.

November 23, 2005 Ottawa announces a \$2-billion compensation package for Aboriginal Canadians who attended residential schools. Over 80 000 people find themselves eligible for an average settlement of \$25 000, with victims of abuse given the opportunity to appeal for larger settlements. A month later, the compensation is approved by Canada's courts, and the first payments begin to flow to victims in September 2007.

April 28, 2008 Justice Harry LaForme, an Ontario judge and member of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, is appointed chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The commission's mandate is to study the residential school system, reporting on its history and commemorating its victims. Less than a month later, Claudette Dumont-Smith, a health professional, and Jane Brewin Morley, a lawyer, are added to the panel. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission begins its work on June 1, 2008.

June 11, 2008 Prime Minister Stephen Harper formally apologizes for Canada's participation in the creation and administration of a school system designed to destroy Aboriginal culture.

Sources: "Time of residential schools" (www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/05/16/f-timeline-residential-schools.html); "Ottawa, Catholic Church renegotiate residential school payout," CBC News, January 15, 2008

Activity

Using two different highlight markers, perform the following task:

In one colour highlight the timeline items that clearly had a negative impact on Aboriginal culture.

In a second colour highlight the timeline items that showed a positive movement away from the "kill the Indian in the child" spirit of the residential school system.

Follow-up

Use the timeline to write a brief history of the residential school controversy.

CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL APOLOGY

The Government Apologizes

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered the following apology to Aboriginal Canadians in the House of Commons.

Mr. Speaker, I stand before you today to offer an apology to former students of Indian residential schools. The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history.

In the 1870s, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate Aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools.

Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.

These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal.

Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child."

Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.

Most schools were operated as "joint ventures" with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, or United churches.

The Government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities.

Many were inadequately fed, clothed, and housed.

All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents, and communities.

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools.

Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools, and others never returned home.

The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian residential schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage, and language.

While some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, these stories are far overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children, and their separation from powerless families and communities.

The legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today. It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors that have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered.

It is a testament to their resilience as individuals and to the strength of their cultures.

Regrettably, many former students are not with us today and died never having received a full apology from the Government of Canada.

The Government recognizes that the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation.

Therefore, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to Aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential schools system.

To the approximately 80 000 living former students, and all family members and communities, the Government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes, and we apologize for having done this.

We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions, that it created a void in many lives and communities, and we apologize for having done this.

We now recognize that, in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow, and we apologize for having done this.

We now recognize that, far too often, these institutions gave rise to abuse or neglect and were inadequately controlled, and we apologize for failing to protect you.

Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience, and for this we are sorry.

The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long.

The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country.

There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian residential schools system to ever again prevail.

You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time, and, in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey.

The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.

We are sorry.

In moving toward healing, reconciliation, and resolution of the sad legacy of Indian residential schools, implementation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement agreement began on September 19, 2007.

Years of work by survivors, communities, and Aboriginal organizations culminated in an agreement that gives us a new beginning and an opportunity to move forward together in partnership.

A cornerstone of the settlement agreement is the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

This commission presents a unique opportunity to educate all Canadians on the Indian residential schools system.

It will be a positive step in forging a new relationship between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, a relationship based on the knowledge of our shared history, a respect for each other, and a desire to move forward together with a renewed understanding that strong families, strong communities, and vibrant cultures and traditions will contribute to a stronger Canada for all of us.

Activity

Write a 250-word letter to the Prime Minister (giving him feedback on his apology.) Highlight the areas of the speech that you found most meaningful or areas of the speech that you think needed more attention.

You can send your comments by e-mail to pm@pm.gc.ca or write (no postage stamp required) or fax the Prime Minister's office at:

Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa
K1A 0A2
Fax: 613-941-6900

CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL APOLOGY

Truth and Reconciliation

In May 2006, the Canadian government settled the largest class-action lawsuit in Canadian history. Facing a potential legal and financial disaster, the federal government needed to find a way to settle the more than 10 000 lawsuits filed against it by victims of abuse at federally funded and church-run Aboriginal residential schools. Liberal Frank Iacobucci worked with legal representatives of Aboriginal groups and the churches to iron out a deal that came to be known as the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). The agreement provided financial compensation in the amount of \$10 000 for all living residential school students, with an additional \$3 000 provided for each year an individual student attended the school. The average payout would be in the neighbourhood of \$25 000. Students who suffered physical or sexual abuse were eligible to apply for a greater settlement, to a maximum of \$275 000. Of the over 80 000 Aboriginal people entitled to participate in the agreement, only 5 000 opted out of the IRSSA.

A key component of the IRSSA was the formation of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (IRSTRC) designed to give Aboriginal residential schools students a chance to tell their stories. It became evident from the time that the first stories of abuse began to reach the Canadian public consciousness that the Aboriginal population was seeking two things: justice and healing. The trauma of the residential schools experience has been a major contributing factor to the high level of alcohol and drug addiction

in Aboriginal communities. In an effort to heal some of the scars prevalent within the Aboriginal community, native leaders called on the government to form and fund a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in an effort to give residential schools survivors a chance to tell their stories. Over the course of its five-year mandate, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will:

- compile a historical record of the residential school system
- write a report about their findings that includes recommendations to the Canadian government on how to deal with the legacy of the residential school system
- establish a research centre to act as a permanent resource for Canadians seeking to understand the nature and legacy of the residential schools system
- host seven events across Canada designed to promote awareness of the residential schools system and its legacy
- participate in a Commemoration Initiative that pays tribute to residential schools students

On June 1, 2008, the IRSTRC started its work under the direction of commission chair Justice Harry LaForme, an Ontario judge and member of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, and his fellow commissioners Claudette Dumont-Smith, a health professional, and Jane Brewin Morley, a lawyer. Their goal is to help the Aboriginal community bring closure to this sad chapter in Canadian history. It is also the hope of the commission that it will be able to shed greater light on what really happened in Canada's residential schools.

Questions

1. What is the IRSSA? How did the IRSSA help students who attended residential schools?
2. What is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? What is its mandate?

CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL APOLOGY

In Their Own Words

The following quotations are from people personally connected to the residential schools issue. Read each one and complete the activity at the end.

“The boarding school disassociates the Indian child from the deleterious home influences to which he would otherwise be subjected. It reclaims him from the uncivilized state in which he has been brought up.” — The Department of Foreign Affairs (Annual Report, 1889), explaining the rationale for removing Aboriginal children from their families (*The Globe and Mail*, October 22, 1996)

“I tried for the last 10 years to write what happened to me at the residential school. I only got as far as my life before residential school.” — Sylvia Gould, former student at the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, on her difficulty confronting painful school memories (*CBC News*, May 12, 2008)

“I remember a nun shaking me because I was running in the hallway. She shook me so hard, her nails dug into my arm. I have those scars a long, long time.” — Rose Wawatie Beaudoin says this as she rubs her arms, remembering an incident when she attended a residential school in Kenora (*Toronto Star*, June 12, 2008)

“I left here like a dysfunctional person. I didn't know anything about love, caring, and sharing. Every night your mom and dad would have tucked you in bed. You don't get that when you're here. Nobody loved you. If you had a sad moment, you just suffered it out.” — Geronimo Henry, recounting his time at a residential school in Brantford, Ontario (*The Globe and Mail*, June 12, 2008)

“I remember the first day I went to Mission School. You never fully understand the loneliness until you experience it.” — Archie Little, reflecting on being separated from his family (*Wind Speaker*, January 2001)

“I got crying under the blankets at night over my buddy's death. You were not allowed to cry for him, and you couldn't even spend a day at home mourning your buddy. . . . That young boy was an innocent boy. He couldn't have been any more than 11.” — Gilbert Johnson on the death of his boyhood friend Mitchell Joseph in testimony before the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*Hamilton Spectator*, July 10, 2008)

“This was our Holocaust. They did not kill us physically, but they killed us emotionally and spiritually.” — Mary Anne Nakogee-Davis, a victim of sexual abuse by a priest at the residential school she attended (*The Globe and Mail*, October 19, 1996)

“They used to make us sit on their laps. They used to hit us with rollers, pinch us, hit us in the head. Lots of girls got abused.” — Mary Anne Boulette on her experiences at a church-run school on the Bloodvein First Nation (*Hamilton Spectator*, May 1, 2008)

“I think what happened to me is what happened to a lot of people. It wasn't just sexual abuse; it was physical and psychological abuse. It was a violation.” — Assembly of First Nations Chief Philip Fontaine, speaking about his residential school experience (*The Globe and Mail*, October 22, 1996)

“They knew bloody well that these people were doing harmful things to innocent people. And instead of protecting the innocent people who were supposed to be in their care, they protected the offender, and that’s disgraceful.” — Dr. William L. Marshall, one of the world’s foremost authorities on the treatment of sexual offenders, on the actions of the church in their decision to protect clergy from prosecution (*Windspeaker*, April 2001)

“It’s life threatening: ‘If you say anything you’re going to die.’ That’s a threat. If I would have said something at that time [of the abuse], I wouldn’t be talking to you. And even if I had said something it would have went on deaf ears because the priests and nuns, the whole system, didn’t want news going out to the public and the communities.” — John Okemow of the Driftpile First Nation, reflecting on his experience in a residential school (*Windspeaker*, March 2005)

“We have experienced a devastating loss of traditional culture and way of life compounded by loss of language, identity and spirituality, and with it, the corruption of our own history, place names, relationship names, rites of passage, self respect, and pride.” — Brian MacDonald, principal of Onion Lake First Nations Kihew Waciston School (*Windspeaker*, December 2007)

“We are to be in the beginning of a spiritual movement, a movement of truth, a movement of justice, a movement of accountability that is more than just a program or media presentation. It’s a people kind of thing that’s more than just the sum of its parts. I really believe that what we’re seeing is something that has real power to transform people’s lives and ultimately societal structures.” — Native Anglican Bishop Mark MacDonald, at a meeting promoting the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*Wind Speaker*, April 2008)

Activity

Pick three quotes that you feel capture the heart of the residential school controversy. Explain each of your choices in three to five sentences. Be prepared to share your thoughts in a class discussion.

CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL APOLOGY

Activity: Who is responsible?

Residential schools were essentially a partnership between the Canadian government and the nation's Christian churches. While the government assumed the funding and overall administration of the schools collectively, the churches assumed responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the schools, which included curriculum development and staffing. The Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches each played a part in running residential schools in different regions across Canada. When residential schools students started making allegations of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, the government and churches scrambled to figure out who would assume responsibility for the abuse should the students win their lawsuits.

Your Task

Your task is to examine the residential schools issue and decide who needs to accept responsibility. You will do this in the following role-play activity.

1. Form a group of four; two people will play the role of the government and two will play the role of the churches.
2. Research the residential school issue using the information found in this *News in Review* story or by visiting cbc.ca (search: *residential schools*). The CBC Digital Archives at www.cbc.ca/archives also have a range of powerful audio-visual material.
3. Prepare a 250-word statement that demonstrates why your group (either the government or the churches) is not responsible for the abuses at residential schools. Avoid blaming the other side in your statements.
4. Connect with another group and read your statements to them. They will play the role of judges and decide who they feel needs to take responsibility for the abuses at the residential schools. Then switch things up. Listen to the other group's statements and you can decide who needs to take responsibility. Note: You don't need to pick one side or the other; instead you could decide that the responsibility should be shared.

Notes:
