

“Schooled for Inequality: The Education of British Columbia Aboriginal Children”

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Introduction

- Consequences of the residential school system for the quality of Aboriginal life in Canada have lasted into the twenty-first century: the highest rates of impoverishment, incarceration, suicide and alcoholism in Canada.
- Residential school policy was premised on assimilation: “The Indian problem exists owing to the fact that the Indian is untrained to take his place in the world.”
- The initial goal of the residential school was the absolute opposite of what occurred. Instead of assimilating First Nations, residential schools became vehicles for marginalizing generations.
- The reasons for failure had less to do with individual teachers or administrators than a federal policy that legitimized and even compelled children to be schooled “not for assimilation but for inequality.”
- The inequality inherent in federal schools for Aboriginal children rests in four complementary attributes of the system devised and overseen by the Department of Indian Affairs:
 - The Assumption of the sameness of Aboriginal peoples across Canada
 - Despite a parallel curriculum between federal schools and the provincial ones that educated non-Aboriginal students, Aboriginal children were allotted less time in the classroom.
 - The instruction of Aboriginal children was by volunteers and not professionally trained teachers.
 - Federal funding of schools for Aboriginal children was below provincial funding levels for public schools.

Assumption of Aboriginal Peoples’ Sameness

- The British North America Act made Aboriginal peoples “wards” of the federal government, who then sponsored schooling, health care and other services in exchange for the Aboriginal surrender of traditional lands and relocation to much smaller reserves.
- 1867: Aboriginal peoples still occupied much of the land in BC, but biological determinism said that persons who were non-White were inferior and incapable of using the land to the best advantage, so they were reduced to a single dependent status.
- Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) was charged with overseeing all aspects of federal policy.
- 2 types of residential schools came into being
 - Boarding schools for younger children
 - Industrial schools for older siblings
 - Over time the distinction broke down
- Residential schools actually removed an education option already in place for BC Aboriginal children. They had started to attend regular public schools. They by far outnumbered non-Aboriginal students and their numbers were needed to meet minimum enrolment necessary for schools to run.

- Many different Aboriginal languages existed.
- BC Aboriginal peoples were wealthy and never experienced the wrenching despair of utter dependency that their prairie counterparts did because of all their resources.
- Contemporaries distinguished BC's Aboriginal population as intelligent and more capable of taking care of themselves than other First Nations.
- In many of the first public schools Aboriginal students were the first to enrol because their parents wanted them to prosper in the developing society.
- Shift began in late 1800s.
- Growing numbers of settlers meant that Aboriginal pupils were no longer essential to meet minimum enrolments.
- By 1900 BC had 14 residential schools and 28 day schools where the vast majority of Aboriginal students were forced to attend.

Time in the Classroom

- Only half of each day was usually spent in the classroom at residential schools.
 - 2-4hrs in Aboriginal schools as opposed to 5+hrs in public schools
- This combined with the fact that Aboriginal students were forced to learn in a second language meant it was very uncommon for them to go past grade 3 by the time they were 16, when they could stop going to school.
- Some 18 year olds made it to grade 8, which they were not allowed to move past.
- The rest of the day was spent teaching boys the lowest trades and farming, or household chores for girls.

Teachers and Teaching

- Most teachers were missionaries for the various religious denominations in Canada; they were passionate about aboriginal conversion.
- By leaving schools' ongoing operation to missionaries the federal government relieved itself of direct responsibility for the provision, payment or supervision of teaching staff.
- Some teachers were French missionaries who could barely speak English let alone teach it to students whose first languages were not English.

Underfunding

- Per-pupil subsidy was inadequate to provide a minimum standard of everyday life.
- Teachers/Missionaries were expected to scramble for donations.
- The half-day program was used by most schools to continue their existence since they could not afford staff
 - Boys tended the grounds and ran the farms that fed everyone
 - Girls made all of the school uniforms and did all of the cleaning
- Hunger was a huge issue and staff usually directed most of the funding to their own food.
- During WWI more funding was given to POWs than residential school students.
- Per-pupil subsidy eventually was only half of what public school students received and teachers were not paid or given vacation at all by the government.
- "Contributing to a deteriorating situation was some missionaries' growing interest in converting Asians, viewed as more tractable and perhaps more glamorous than Aboriginal peoples."

- Some contemporaries criticized the greediness of the government in terms of residential schools but regardless, in 1947 45\$/pupil was allotted residential schools vs. 200\$/pupil in public schools.

The Aboriginal Response and Changing Times

- Federal policy purposely deluded Aboriginal peoples.
 - Many families accepted what they thought they were getting: a genuine opportunity for their children.
- Pupils were often discouraged or forbidden to tell their families what went on at school and many schools censored students' letters home.
- Parents who tried to challenge the system were simply not listened to.
- By 1970, ¾ of the 13,000 Aboriginal pupils of BC were in integrated schools.
- 1969: Trudeau tried to abolish the Indian Act altogether but the Aboriginal response was overwhelmingly negative; it would have meant absolutely no more help from the government.
- Even today the schooling of Aboriginal children remains a federal responsibility but tuition agreements with provinces, churches and bands means children in BC no longer have a single education option and they can go wherever they choose.
- Children on reserve often attend schools operated by the band.
- Most Aboriginal children living in urban settings now attend school alongside their non-Aboriginal contemporaries almost as a matter of course.

The Legacy

- Half or fewer of BC Aboriginal children of past generations actually attended residential school but numbers were sufficient for family life to deteriorate.
- Languages became a casualty, with many parents who'd attended Residential schools seeing them as of little value.
- "The self-fulfilling prophecy inherent in racism came to fruition as Aboriginal peoples deemed inferior were schooled for inequality and thereby largely did end up at the bottom ranks of Canadian society."
- "The DIA may have saved a few dollars in the short run, but the cost was generations of diminished and even wasted lives. The past cannot be undone, but it can be better understood. Only then can the cycle of the residential school, and its dominance of Aboriginal educational history, be broken."