

The shadows of residential schools

Many have asked why we should apologize for events long past, and even whether Indian residential schools had some benefits -- they should be reminded of the intent and lasting impact of that grotesque system

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'I don't know what natives are complaining about," a friend recently commented. "People spend lots of money to send their kids to residential school these days."

He was kidding, of course, but I think the unconscious insensitivity of his remark reflects how little most Canadians understand the historical operation of Indian residential schools and their ongoing legacy.

We've all heard it, right? I didn't do it; why should I feel guilty? That happened a long time ago; why is the government apologizing? Instead of whining about residential schools, why don't Indians just get over it and move on?

Indeed, a popular line of recent punditry has been that many benefitted greatly from their educations in residential schools, and anyway, what else were we to do with them?

I was first introduced to the realities of Indian residential schools while teaching in Lytton, a predominantly aboriginal community in the Fraser Canyon. I knew something about these institutions; indeed, St. Georges, located just outside of Lytton, was still operating as a residence for children collected from all over the province.

Like most well-meaning teachers, I tried my best to reach my native students, who often seemed aloof or even hostile. Their best weapon against my no-doubt overbearing verbal attempts to connect was silence, and so their lives, despite the shocking evidence of alcoholism, abuse, suicide and educational indifference, remained largely a cipher.

It was in the spring of my first year in Lytton, 1974, that Robert Sterling, the great native educator and founder of the Native Indian Teacher Education Program at U.B.C., helped me gain a better understanding of the catastrophic effects of residential schools.

Robert was quick to point out that residential schools were just a part of the complex of factors that had so demoralized and weakened aboriginal people in B.C. -- population



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Hundreds of people met at the Chief Joe Mathias Centre in North Vancouver to hear Prime Minister Stephen Harper's official apology in June for the Indian residential schools system.

decimation (estimated at about 75 per cent of the pre-contact population), loss of political and economic autonomy, and overwhelming white settlement (in 1871, there were 10,486 non-natives in B.C.; 10 years later there were 73,000 -- just as the aboriginal population bottomed out at around 23,000).

But for him, residential schools were the key to understanding the effects of colonialism on his community.

The schools, he pointed out, were created, operated and maintained for one purpose: the assimilation of native people so that, as an 1895 Indian Affairs document put it, "the Indian problem would have been solved."

"If the Indian is to become a source of profit to the country," a later Indian Affairs Annual Report states, "it is clear that he must be amalgamated with the white population. Before this can be done ... he must be imbued with the white men's spirit and impregnated with his ideas."

And the medium to do this?

Residential schools, where, as none other than John A. Macdonald himself, put it, "[Indian youth] must be dissociated from the prejudicial influences by which he is surrounded on the reserve of his band ... [and] kept separate from home influences."

To be sure, as many are quick to point out, this was a different time, a period when cultural hubris abounded, the apex of the smugness of colonialism and the British Empire. All true, but those observations miss the point: those attitudes led to the creation of a grotesque system that devastated aboriginal people's morale, shattered their communities, degraded their culture and language, smashed families and destroyed ancient spiritual beliefs that had sustained people for thousands of years. But most importantly, perhaps, is that, after four generations of institutionalization, the shadows and dysfunction of residential schools are still very much at work in native communities and families.

How can this be? A closer look at these institutions, so often discussed but so rarely understood, helps us find an answer.

Although there are many excellent accounts of life in the residential schools (see George Manuel, *The Fourth World*), the general pattern was much the same: a child was removed from his or her home and community at five or six, kept separate from family for 10 months, prohibited from speaking his or her native language, worked to maintain the school, given minimal academic and vocational training, subjected to religious and cultural indoctrination daily, and then released after eight to 10 years. But what actually went on?

For those 10 months children had virtually no contact with their parents, family or community. Each school was operated by a religious denomination whose primary purpose was to convert Indian students to their brand of Christianity. One to four hours a day was spent in religious activity or study.

The school regulated every aspect of the child's life: when he or she ate and slept, what and when he or she spoke, who he or she associated with, what jobs he or she had to perform, what clothes he or she wore, when and under what circumstances he or she could see his or her family -- even the number of toilet paper sheets the child could use.

Children were totally separated by sex for their entire eight-year stay at the schools. Even academic classes were segregated. And as much as half a student's day was spent in labour. For the boys this usually meant menial work in the school gardens (each school was supposed to be self-sufficient in food). Girls generally worked in the laundry and kitchen, training to become domestics.

Usually four hours or less were devoted to academic study, and even then classes were taught by grossly unqualified instructors using virtually no materials and employing the most authoritarian methods.

Education was only provided to Grade 8. If a native student somehow acquired the academic skills to go on, he or she had to pay tuition to the provincial schools.

And sexual and physical abuse was rampant.

Even though most residential schools were slowly phased out during the '60s, the damage was done, and the devastating effects have been passed down from generation to generation -- and are still with us.

As one aboriginal sexual offender put it, "They turned us into monsters. Then they turned us loose."

Robert Sterling focused on eight particularly tragic side effects which still haunt native communities:

- loss of aboriginal languages (and the cultural underpinnings these contained);
- loss of sense of parenting skills and a sense of responsibility for children;
- loss of decision-making skills (due to the nature of hierarchical institutions);
- disintegration of Indian cultural values (a function of the conversion thrust and alienation from community);
- reluctance to take initiative (a function of institutionalization);
- high incidence of sexual crimes and domestic violence in native homes and communities (due to extensive sexual abuse in schools and blurring of generational divisions);
- extensive and devastating substance abuse (self-medication);
- astronomical suicide rates (sexual guilt, hopelessness, loss of pride and sense of autonomy).

Okanagan-Shuswap MP Colin Mayes and I disagree on a good many issues, but he has long been a champion of aboriginal people and an advocate for fairness and respect in regard to native relations.

His sentiments regarding Prime Minister Stephen Harper's historic statement on residential schools put that declaration in the right perspective -- this is not just about apologizing,

it's about moving forward together: "Our government has done the right thing ... every Canadian should do their part to build a relationship and reconciliation between our aboriginal brothers and sisters in our communities. Love and respect can accomplish that in the spirit of reconciliation. It's time to travel together towards healing and reconciliation with Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

June 11th was a great day for Canada."

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