Community Part Two

Residential Schools

The Work Part

**Respond to each of the following questions in complete sentences.**

1. In what ways might the church-run schools created in the 1800s have differed from those begun in the 1600s? Think about changes in the goals of education, as well as changes in the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the rest of the Canadian population.
2. What were the government’s goals in educating Aboriginal children and how were they different from the goals of the churches? Why might the partnership between the government and the churches have been advantageous to both parties?
3. In what ways do you think residential and mainstream (white) schools might have been similar or different during the more than 100-year history of the residential system. For example; skills or subjects taught, gender-based segregation, quality of teaching, treatment of the children. What might account for the similarities and/or differences?
4. If you had been one of the “good and dedicated” teachers who worked at a residential school, what steps might you have taken to improve the children’s education? How might you have done this while still complying with the school’s goals for the students? How might you have been able to improve their living conditions outside the classroom?
5. Why do you think many Aboriginal people felt that the 1998 Statement of Reconciliation made by the government was inadequate?
6. Why do you suppose victims of crimes or abuse are sometimes awarded money as compensation for their sufferings? In your opinion, is money an effective way to apologize?

**Assessment**

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| **Criteria / Level** | **Level 4** | **Level 3** | **Level 2** | **Level 1** |
| Knowledge | Responses are packed with accurate supporting details | Responses contain considerable accurate supporting details | Responses contain some accurate supporting details | Responses contain limited accurate supporting details |
| Thinking | Nothing is copied. All thoughts are clearly the student’s own and are very insightful | Nothing is copied and insights are pretty clever | I think I see some copying there. Think for yourself! | You’re responses aren’t wrong, but a lot of it isn’t actually you |

The Reading Part

In this reading, you will explore the history of the Indian residential school system in Canada; the impacts these schools have had on former residents and the families and communities; and the government’s and churches’ apologies to Aboriginal peoples.

**A Brief History of the Residential Schools**

Prior to the Canadian government’s involvement in the education of Aboriginal children, Aboriginal cultures had already had a model of education in place for hundreds of years, which effectively sustained their ways of life. As you’ve already read, learning in Aboriginal cultures mainly took place by

* Observing others and participating in daily tasks and
* Listening to the stories and teachings of the Elders

When European explorers and adventurers and Aboriginal peoples first came into contact with one another, they had no interest in trying to significantly influence one another’s way of life or world views. However, this changed with the arrival of **missionaries[[1]](#endnote-1)** from Europe, and with the shift in relationship between Euro-Canadians and Aboriginal peoples as Euro-Canadians began seeking greater control over the lands and imposing their beliefs and values on Aboriginal peoples.

***The Early Mission and Industrial Schools***

French missionaries came to North America to convert First Nations and Inuit peoples to Christianity. In the early 1600s, the first mission schools for First Nations children were established in New France by the Recollet, Jesuit and Ursuline religious orders. By the 1820s, Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists ran church schools in other parts of the country, including Upper Canada.

In the 1800s, the Imperial government, and later the Government of Canada, focused on educating First Nations children as the best way of “civilizing” them and gradually assimilating First Nations as a whole into Canadian society. In his 1879 report on the industrial boarding school system for Native Americans in the United States, Nicholas Flood Davin recommended the creation of similar schools in Canada. In these industrial schools, children spent part of the day learning farming and housekeeping skills. Nicholas Flood Davin called for First Nations children to be removed from their homes and into schools because “the interference of the wigwam was stronger than that of the school.”

The Davin Report, as it became known, was well-received by the government under Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, and over time, steps were taken to implement its main recommendations. Since the Christian churches were already widely involved with running mission schools, in 1892 the Department of Indian Affairs formerly established the residential school system in partnership with the churches. The system was part of the larger process of nation building across the Canadian frontier.

**The Government and Church Partnership**

Under the residential school system, the federal government provided the funding and the churches provided the staff. The system included boarding and day schools built close to or on reserves, and industrial schools located farther from reserves. In 1920, legislation was passed that made attendance compulsory for all First Nations children aged 7 to 15 years. Indian agents enforced this law and forcibly took children from their families if they had to. Parents who tried to keep their children from attending the schools could be imprisoned. In 1930, the government-appointed Indian agents were given yet more authority and could commit children to the boarding schools and keep them there until the age of 18.

After World War II, as part of Canada’s post-war expansion in the North, additional schools opened on Inuit homelands. In 1954, the newly formed Sub-Committee on Eskimo Education of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources recommended that the residential school system be introduced throughout the North. Inuit children who attended these schools, such as St. Peter’s in hay River, Northwest Territories, often had to travel a great distance from their homes and most only saw their parents once a year. The growth of the schools was so rapid that, by 1964, the number of school-aged Inuit children attending residential school had increased more than 75 percent.

The residential school system also accepted Metis children, although they were rarely recorded as being Metis. Metis children were not forced to attend residential schools because the federal government at the time refused to take responsibility for educating them. However, since funding for the residential schools was based on a per capita system (the more students enrolled, the more funding you received), principals at low-enrollment schools encouraged Metis parents to send their children so the schools would receive enough government funding to keep operating. Metis children often encountered discrimination as they were seen as either “too white” to fit in with non-Aboriginal students in the mainstream school system. Metis identity and culture were not reflected in a positive way in either school system.

The residential school system lasted for more than 100 years and affected the lives of thousands of Aboriginal students. Why did the schools create such a tragic legacy for generations of Aboriginal peoples? In the following sections, you about what life was like for Aboriginal students in these schools and why the consequences of attending them were often disastrous, both for the students themselves and the communities from which they were taken.

**Life in the Residential Schools**

From the moment they arrived at residential school, Aboriginal children followed a much-regimented routine designed to re-socialize them to the ways of mainstream Canada. Children as young as four years old were taken to these schools. Boys and girls either attended separate schools or lived in separate buildings within a school. This meant that brothers and sisters, no matter how young, rarely had contact with one another. Children attended for 10 months out of the year, but those who lived too far away to travel home spent the summer months at school as well.

Boys and girls were given clothing, usually a plain uniform, and their hair was cut short. They were to take baths right away and have their heads examined and treated, usually with kerosene, for lice. Dormitory rooms were assigned, and children were expected to sleep in their designated rooms – not necessarily with their siblings as they were used to doing at home.

In addition to reading, writing, and basic mathematical skills, children were taught gender-specific subjects or trades. Boys learned about agriculture, carpentry, shoe-making, and blacksmithing; while girls were taught sewing, knitting, cooking, and ironing.

Until the 1950s, when full-day schooling was established, Aboriginal boys and girls spent only a half day in an instructional setting. The other half of the day was spent on activities or chores to keep the schools running as self-sufficient institutions. The girls cleaned bathrooms, patched clothes, washed pots and pans, and did the laundry and ironing. The boys worked the farms and did repairs. In effect, the students were working as unpaid labourers.

Aboriginal children were not allowed to speak their first language and, in most cases, they were severely punished if they uttered a word of it. Not only were children expected to learn English or French, but they also had to adopt Canadian ways of life and values and specifically, the religious teachings of the church that ran that school. The days began and ended with prayers and there were mass services on Sundays and Christian holidays. The way the schools were run expressed the beliefs and values of European world views, not Aboriginal ones, with an emphasis on punctuality, order, cleanliness and strict obedience. Aboriginal students were not allowed to follow their spiritual practices honouring the Creator.

On the other hand, some positive reinforcement, such as prizes and privileges, was used to encourage students to study hard and to work at their chores without complaining. However, discipline was mostly maintained through strict punishment.

Recreation for the students was provided through organized sports teams such as football, baseball and hockey. These activities were segregated by gender. Some students took part in brass or marching bands, and many girls joined Girl Guides and dance groups. The sports, music and dancing, however, were not related to Aboriginal games, drumming, songs or dances. The organized group activities provided a break from tedious day-to-day routines and often some privileges for the students involved. However, competition for spots on the teams and the groups was fierce, and if students did not perform well they were chastised and sometimes physically punished.

***Poor Living Conditions and Inadequate Instruction***

Not only were the restrictions placed on the students strict and the punishments severe, but often the children also had to endure poor living conditions. Children were inadequately clothed, underfed and overworked. Many of the schools were poorly constructed, with heating, ventilation and sanitary problems. These conditions, along with over-crowding, led to the spread of infectious diseases such as **tuberculosis[[2]](#endnote-2)** and influenza. To combat the spread of infections, school officials allowed mass surgeries of children’s teeth, tonsils and adenoids.

In addition to the poor living conditions, many residential school students received inadequate academic instruction. R.F. Davey’s 1968 department review quoted a study reporting that, as late as 1950, “over 40 percent of the teaching staff had no professional training.” It was not until the late 1950s, after the government had taken over the responsibilities for hiring staff and increased their pay, that more qualified teachers were attracted to positions at residential schools. Because the curriculum was not based on Aboriginal world views, and since it was also often substandard when compared with curriculum covered in mainstream schools, the residential school students graduated without the knowledge and skills they needed to thrive in either their home community or mainstream society.

***Abuse***

The removal from their families, the poor living conditions, and low standards of instruction in the residential schools were all bad enough, but what really scarred many of the children who attended these residential schools was the abuse they endured at the hands of teachers, principals, staff, and other students. Punishment was the main means of control used in residential schools, and, unfortunately, it was often very harsh and cruel punishment, such as the withholding of meals, confinement, strapping and public humiliation.

Abuse was not limited to physical punishment and emotional ridicule. Tragically, for many students, the abuse was also sexual. While there were many good and dedicated people who worked within the residential school system, unfortunately there were also men and women who exploited their positions of authority over the students.

**Apology and Reconciliation**

After years of protests by Aboriginal parents, leaders, and organizations, and the many reports of problems, the federal government knew that the residential school system was flawed. In 1958, regional inspectors from Indian Affairs recommended that the residential school system be abandoned. However, it was not until 1969 that the partnership between the federal government and the churches ended as the government sought to separate church and state in matters of education. In the next decade, the federal government gave control of the residential schools over to the First Nations bands. In 1970, Blue Quills Residential School in Alberta was the first residential school to be transferred to band control.

The National Indian Brotherhood’s position paper of 1972, “Indian Control of Indian Education,” produced the desired response from the federal government. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, more and more of the residential schools shut their doors for good. Eventually, the last government-run school closed in 1998. The residential school system failed as a system of education for three main reasons:

* Severe underfunding, particularly during the two World Wars and the Depression
* Inadequate management due to the rapid growth of the system
* Most importantly, almost complete disregard for the health and well-being of the students

For those individuals, families, and communities suffering long-term effects, the fact that this system had ended was not enough. Something more was required to heal the intergenerational trauma caused by the residential schools. Aboriginal leaders and groups called for acknowledgement, apology and action from the federal government and the churches.

***The First Accounts of Abuse***

Not satisfied with just the closure of residential schools, individuals and communities took action. In 1988, residential school survivors from St. George’s Residential School in Lytton, British Columbia, filed lawsuits against the Anglican Church for damages caused by sexual abuse. Then, in 1989 and 1990, abusers were named, taken to court and convicted in British Columbia and the Yukon.

Also in 1989, Canadians were shocked by news reports that non-Aboriginal orphan boys had been routinely abused by the Catholic order at the Mount Cashel Orphanage in Newfoundland, as far back as the 1950s. This case opened the floodgates to accounts of similar abuse in the residential schools across Canada and, finally, national attention focused on the damages that this system inflicted.

In 1990, Phil Fontaine, who at that time was the leader of the Association of Manitoba Chiefs, spoke out about the sexual abuse he suffered as a student at Fort Alexander Indian Residential School in Manitoba. He called for the churches to acknowledge the physical, psychological and sexual abuse endured by the students of the system. As the litigation list grew, residential school survivors formed support groups to tell their stories and to help one another heal. Non-Aboriginal leaders and citizens condemned the abuse that had taken place for so long. It was time for the churches and government to respond.

***The Churches’ Response***

For their part in the residential school system and its detrimental effects on Aboriginal cultures, various churches in Canada issued statements of regret and apology. The United Church issued two apologies, one in 1986 and another in 1998, specifically addressing the issue of abuse at residential schools. The Catholic Order of the Oblate Missionaries apologized in July 1991. The Anglican Church followed with an apology in 1993 and the Presbyterian Church in 1994.

Even though the Roman Catholic Church operated three quarters of the residential schools at the height of the system, it was the last church to have its leader express regret. In a private audience with delegates from the Assembly of First Nations in April 2009, Pope Benedict XVI expressed “sorrow” for the abuse and terrible treatment of First Nations students in the residential schools run by the Roman Catholic Church. It was not an official apology, but Phil Fontaine, then leader of the Assembly of First Nations and one of the groups that included Elders and residential school survivors, said, “The fact that the word ‘apology’ was not used does not diminish this moment in any way.” Metis and Inuit survivors and delegates were not included in this private audience – a fact that disappointed Metis and Inuit leaders in Canada.

***The Government’s Response***

In 1991, following the failure of the Meech Lake Accord and the crisis at Oka, Quebec, the federal government set up the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to Address, among many issues, the social problems facing Aboriginal communities. Many residential school survivors told their stories to the commission. The result was that the 1996 RCAP Report examined residential schools and their impact on Aboriginal peoples in detail and made certain recommendations. While the recommendation that a separate inquiry be conducted into the residential school system was never taken up, the federal government began to work with the churches and with the Assembly of First Nations to devise a plan to compensate the former students for abuses they had suffered.

The federal government has apologized twice for its part in the residential school system. The first apology came in January 1998 when Jean Chrétien was prime minister. However, it was called a “Statement of Reconciliation” and it was delivered by Indian Affairs minister Jane Stewart in a press conference room, not in parliament by the prime minister. It did include an action plan with a $350 million healing fund and established the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) to manage the fund. The money would be used to sponsor community-based projects such as wellness and counselling centres. The AHF was given as 11-year mandate that was eventually extended to 2012. Additional funds were distributed in 2005 and 2007 so that the AHF has been able to finance 1345 grants in Canada worth $523 million.

However, there still remained the issue of compensation to the victims of abuse in the residential school system, especially given that, in March 1988, the federal government under Brian Mulroney had formally apologized and issued a settlement to Japanese Canadians who were wrongfully interned and whose property was seized during World War II.

It was a complicated process that took the federal government, the churches and Aboriginal leaders some time to work out. The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement was finally implemented in 2007, although it had been announced two years before. The agreement settled the largest class-action lawsuit to date in Canada. It includes a Common Experience Payment available to all former residential school students. They receive $10 000 for the first year or part of a year they attended school and an additional $3000 for every subsequent year. Acceptance of the payment releases the government and the churches from any additional liability, except in the cases of sexual abuse and severe physical abuse. In these cases, the victims can pursue a separate and independent process. This system avoids lengthy and costly time in the courts, which is important since so many of the survivors are nearing the end of their lives.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered the federal government’s official apology in Parliament on June 11, 2008. This time, federal party leaders also spoke after the prime minister and, most importantly, leaders representing First Nations, Metis, and Inuit delivered their remarks for the official record. Six residential school survivors were present in the House of Commons that day, and across the country events were held so that people could view the occasion live.

The prime minister declared, “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.”

Phil Fontaine, at the time chief of the Assembly of First Nations, took the floor after the prime minister and the other federal party leaders, and said, “For the generation that will follow us, we bear witness today…Never again will this house consider us the Indian problem just for being who we are…We heard the government of Canada take full responsibility for this dreadful chapter in our shared history. We heard the prime minister declare that this will never happen again. Finally, we heard Canada say it is sorry.”

1. a person sent on a religious mission, esp. one sent to promote Christianity in a foreign country [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. an infectious bacterial disease characterized by the growth of nodules (tubercles) in the tissues, esp. the lungs [↑](#endnote-ref-2)