

A Residential School Legacy¹

Anna Student

Douglas College

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From the late 1800s to the 1980s, more than 100,000 First Nations children in Canada attended residential schools (Llewellyn, 2008, p. 258).² To attend these schools, children were taken away from their families and communities. At the schools, the children suffered from emotional, physical, sexual and spiritual abuse (Steckley & Cummins, 2001, p. 191). The worst abuses were often used as punishment for speaking their indigenous languages (Petten, 2007, p. 22). The imposition of residential schools on First Nations children has led to significant loss of indigenous languages, and this language loss has led to further cultural losses for traditional First Nations cultures in Canada.

One far-reaching result of the residential school system is the loss of indigenous languages in Canada. A major cause of this loss was the removal of children from their families and language communities. Petten (2007) reported that, having been removed from their families at an early age, children lost the opportunity to continue to develop their mother tongues (p. 22). At the schools, only English or French were used. Furthermore, children were punished and abused for using their indigenous languages. Survivors of residential schools report priests and nuns punching, slapping, verbally abusing (Knockwood, 1992, p. 99), and sticking pins in the tongues (Steckley & Cummins, 2001, p. 193) of very young children for speaking their mother tongues. In the face of this abuse, many children quickly lost the ability to speak their indigenous languages. A long-term result of residential schools is a significant reduction in the numbers of speakers of indigenous languages. According to the 2001 Canada Census, only 24% of people who identified themselves as aboriginal said they could communicate in an aboriginal language (as cited in Norris, 2007, p. 20). In addition, over the past 100 years, at least ten indigenous

² APA style requires page numbers only for direct quotations, but it encourages the use of page numbers even with paraphrased material.

languages have become extinct (Norris, 2007, p. 20). Although residential schools were not the sole cause of this loss of language, they played a significant role in the decline.

This loss of indigenous languages caused by residential schools affected traditional family and community relationships. First, children's loss of their ability to speak their mother tongue affected their relationships within the family. As residential school survivor and researcher Isabelle Knockwood observed, it "drove a wedge between family members," even between siblings at the same school (1992, p. 100). For example, a residential school survivor, Freda Simon, told of arriving at a residential school speaking only her mother tongue to find that her sister, who had been taken to the school two years earlier, could no longer speak their language (as cited in Knockwood, 1992, p. 100). This example shows that even at the schools, family members were separated due to language loss. When children went back to their communities, they were unable to communicate with parents and elders. They felt "suspended in limbo" (Knockwood, 1992, p. 158). As a result, the early survivors of residential schools were unable to develop bonds with older members of their communities and were unable to learn the traditional ways of their people through "songs, games, stories and ceremonies" (Blair, Rice, Wood & Janvier, 2002, p. 89). A strong traditional value in First Nations cultures was respect for elders (Couture, 1996), but with no ability for young and old to communicate, meaningful relationships between the generations became impossible.

Besides damaging family and community relationships, the loss of indigenous languages also distanced many First Nations people from their traditional belief systems. One common belief among First Nations traditional cultures is that "all of life is spiritual: everything that exists, animals, plants, people, rocks, the sun and stars have elements of sacredness" (Rajotte, 1998, p. 21). This suggests that aboriginal peoples' connection to nature is crucial to their

spirituality. Aboriginal spirituality is passed on orally by elders through myths and rituals. Without knowledge of their traditional languages, young people could not learn about the spiritual beliefs of their people. This spirituality was all encompassing, affecting not only their thoughts about the spirit world but also their knowledge of places, plants and animals and traditional skills such as fishing, trapping, and tanning (Blair et al., 2002, p. 96). As Steckley and Cummins have pointed out, without access to the elders' knowledge of nature, young people lost access to the beliefs and practices their people had developed over thousands of years (2001, p. 17). Therefore, the loss of language led to the loss of traditional spiritual beliefs and connection to nature.

In short, interpersonal relationships and traditional belief systems were both sacrificed when residential schools contributed to the decline of First Nations children's indigenous language abilities. The effects of these losses continue to this day despite attempts to reverse the damage. On June 11, 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Steven Harper offered an official apology on behalf of the Canadian government to survivors of residential schools for the treatment they had received there (Fitzpatrick & Nguyen, 2008, p. 1). Following this apology, Beverly Jacobs, President of the Native Women's Association of Canada, noted that aboriginal people need more than an apology; they need a government commitment to dealing with the negative impacts of the schools in areas such as "language, culture, . . . tradition, and spirituality" (Native women's leader, 2008, p. 2). The effects of the residential schools on First Nations' language and culture will never be undone; all Canadians can do now is support efforts by aboriginal people to preserve and revitalize those linguistic and cultural traditions that have not been lost.

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