

Activity 10: Residential Schools: Historical Perspectives

Residential schools were government-sponsored religious schools established to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian society. Successive Canadian governments used legislation to strip Indigenous peoples of basic human and legal rights to gain control over the peoples and their lands and natural resources. The goals of these schools were to “civilize” Indigenous peoples by forcibly converting them to Christianity, and to integrate them into Canadian society through a process of cultural, social, educational, economic, and political assimilation. Residential schools were designed to break the links Indigenous children held with their families, communities, cultures, and identities. The schools were underfunded and overcrowded; they were rife with starvation, neglect, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, often including isolation from normal human contact and nurturing. Students were forcibly removed from their communities, homes, and parents, and frequently forbidden to speak their language or to perform traditional music and dance. The experiences of Survivors varied from school to school.

“When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with its parents, who are savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly impressed upon myself, as head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.”

— Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald,
Speech to the House of Commons (1883)



Thomas Moore Keesick was a Cree boy from Muscowpetung Saulteaux First Nation in Saskatchewan who entered Regina Indian Industrial School in 1891. These propaganda photos were staged by the Department of Indian Affairs to demonstrate the “civilizing” mission of the Residential School system. Keesick is wearing women’s traditional attire that did not reflect what he would have worn at home.

[1] “A young Aboriginal boy before entering school”

(Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan/R-A8223-1);

[2] “A young Aboriginal boy after entering school”

(Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan/R-A8223-2).

The Legacy of Indian Residential Schools

The legacy of Indian Residential Schools remains a sensitive subject in Canadian history. To better understand the intentions of and motivations for the schools, read **Residential Schools** on The Canadian Encyclopedia and watch the **Chanie Wenjack** Heritage Minute. As well watch the video “We Were Children” from the National Film Board of Canada.

You can also use the following online sources.

National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation: nctr.ca/map.php diseases within the institutions.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission Reports: nctr.ca/reports.php

Truth and Reconciliation Commission: thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/truth-and-reconciliation-commission

Residential Schools: thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools

Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement: thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indian-residential-schools-settlement-agreement

1. What were the goals of the residential schools? How did the residential schools seek to meet these goals? Was attendance at residential schools mandatory? How was it enforced?
2. Describe life at residential schools. Look at circumstances and policies. How were students at the residential schools affected by the neglect, abuse, and lack of affection?
3. Were officials aware of problems such as hunger and overcrowding at residential schools during the time they were in operation? How did teachers and operators react to these issues?
4. How did Survivors’ relationships with their families and communities change as a result of attending residential schools? How have the policies that traumatized students affected later generations?

Stories of Resistance: Historical Perspectives

Most Residential Schools restricted any form of expression that was connected to students’ Indigenous heritage, including but not limited to clothing, toys, languages, dancing, religious practices, and contact with families and communities. Students sometimes found ways to resist oppression by holding onto their identities, customs, and cultures. It was not always possible to resist, and harsh (often corporal) punishments were handed out to those found breaking the rules. Despite this, many Survivors remember the comfort of secretly holding on to their traditions.

Examine the testimonies of Residential School Survivors using the **Stories of Resistance Worksheet**.

- Look for instances in which Survivors defied their oppressors, fought back, held on to their language, broke the rules, etc. What acts of resistance were common?
- How did children find ways to hold onto their cultures?

Share your observations in a circle and discuss as a class.

Extension Activity:

Visit the **National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation** website and watch “Remembering the Forgotten Children – Muskowekan Residential School Film and “Honouring and Remembering Residential School Survivors”. Also, view the residential schools map.

Visit the **Where are the Children? Healing the Legacy of the Residential Schools** website (wherearethekids.ca)