Stepping Stones

the journey begins

CONCEPTS AND POLICIES OF ASSIMILATION

Planning your learning journey

What are some policies of assimilation that the Canadian government has enacted on Indigenous Peoples?

A group of students and parents from the Saddle Lake Reserve (Alberta), en route to the Methodist-operated Red Deer Indian Industrial School, Alberta, date unknown.

FIRST STEPS

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The process of absorbing one cultural group into another is known as assimilation. Assimilation can be pursued through government policy,[1] which is what the Canadian government has attempted to do over the course of much of its relationship with First Nations, Métis and Inuit. These policies of assimilation have had devastating impacts on Indigenous Peoples and communities, many of which can still be felt today.

CONCEPTS AND POLICIES OF ASSIMILATION

The following concepts and policies relate to the assimilation methods used by the Government of Canada toward Indigenous Peoples. Some are general concepts, while others are specific programs or legislation.

British North America Act (1867): The *BNA Act* put "Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians" under the exclusive legislative authority of the Parliament of Canada.[2] Also known as the *Constitution Act*, this legislation established the Dominion of Canada.[3] The act allowed the Department of Indian Affairs to develop national policies that impacted Indigenous people and "set more local policies in a national context."[4]

Colonialism: Colonialism refers to the aggressive seizure of Indigenous lands and the permanent settlement of European settlers on those lands.[5] This has led to the physical, social, cultural and political displacement of Indigenous Peoples.[6]

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Cultural Genocide: According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next. In its dealing with Aboriginal people, Canada did all these things."[7]

Doctrine of Discovery: The Doctrine of Discovery was a framework that European explorers used to justify their claims to territory that was uninhabited by Christians. Because Indigenous peoples were not Christian, they were deemed nonhuman and thus their land could be freely taken, a concept known as *terra nullius*.[8] The United Nations has denounced the Doctrine of Discovery as "the root of all the discrimination and marginalization [I]ndigenous peoples faced today."[9]

Enfranchisement: Enfranchisement is the termination of legal Indian status, rights and identity. Those who became enfranchised would then gain full Canadian citizenship. Enfranchisement was central to the Canadian government's assimilation policies toward Status First Nations people.[10] Status Indians could be forcibly enfranchised for becoming a doctor, lawyer or member of the clergy, or for serving in the military. As well, an Indian woman who married a non-Status man would have her Status taken.[11]

Eskimo Tag System: From 1945 until the 1970s, Inuit were forced to register with the Canadian government and wear an identification tag around their neck or wrist at all times. This was due to the fact that the federal government did not understand Inuit naming systems, and the Inuit way of naming did not follow standard English spelling.[12] Tags started with an E for eastern or W for western, followed by a four-digit number. The architect of the system, A G Mackinnon, was the medical officer at Pangnirtung in the Northwest Territories in 1935. He said, "As far as the Eskimo is concerned, it does seem to me that this names business is of no great concern to them. They have got on nicely for a long time without cluttering up their minds with such details."[13]

Eskimo identification tag E.6-215 Photo reprinted with permission of Barry Pottle, https://barrypottle.com.

Eurocentrism: Eurocentrism "[p]resupposes the supremacy of Europe and Europeans in world culture, and relates history according to a European perception and experience."[14]

Forced Relocation: First Nations, Métis and Inuit have all been subjected to forced relocation at the hands of the Canadian government. The Reserve system was established under the *Indian Act* and through treaty in order to force First Nations to transition to an agriculturally based lifestyle.[15] Métis have been forcibly relocated several times over the course of history.[16] This displacement eventually led to their unofficial title of "road allowance people," since they established makeshift communities in the unused crown land next to the side of roads.[17] In the 1950s, the Government of Canada wanted to assert its sovereignty in the Arctic and reduce administrative costs of government programs, and therefore began the forcible relocation of Inuit families and communities. Some of these moves happened in the middle of winter, meaning that the rocks they would typically use to build their winter homes, *quamma*, had already been frozen under the snow. Instead they had to make due with their summer shelters, *tupiq*, made out of animal skins, leaving them vulnerable to the harsh winter conditions. As a result, people died. Inuit were moved up to 2,000 km from their homes, to much harsher climates and landscapes. Families were separated, and the impacts have been devastating.[18]

Genocide: According to the United Nations, "Genocide is defined in Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) as 'any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- Killing members of the group
- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.'"[19]

***Gradual Civilization Act* (1857):** This act was intended to "encourage the progress of Civilization among the Indian Tribes in this Province, and the gradual removal of all legal distinctions between them and Her Majesty's other Canadian Subjects."[20] Indian males over the age of 21 who could read, write and speak in English or French and were of good moral character could apply to be enfranchised. Under the *Gradual Civilization Act*, only one individual applied for enfranchisement.[21]

***Indian Act* (1876):** The *Indian Act* is the legislation that governs Indian status, local First Nations governance, First Nations lands and First Nations monies.[22] It has gone through many amendments. The 1880 amendment to the *Indian Act* outlawed spiritual practices such as the Sundance[23] and Potlatch. Spiritually significant ceremonial items were confiscated and dispersed to collectors and museums around the world.[24] The 1914 amendment to the act criminalized the wearing of regalia and the performance of "any Indian dance." The punishment was a fine of $25 and/or imprisonment for one month.[25] These bans remained in effect until 1951. The *Indian Act* remains in force today.

Métis Scrip: Scrip was a policy of the Canadian government to deal with Métis land title. "Half-breed" scrip, as it was officially known, was granted to those Métis who met the criteria set out by the Government of Canada. It was issued in the form of a certificate valued at either $160 or $240 or acres of land. Throughout the scrip process, scrip speculators committed widespread fraud. In the early 1920s, Canada's Senate changed the Criminal Code to effectively decriminalize this fraudulent activity. This sparked outrage among the Métis, some of whom became politically active as a result.[26]

Pass System: The Red River Resistance (1869–1870) and the North West Resistance (1880) were used as justification for the pass system, which was enforced from 1885 until the 1940s. Under the pass system, First Nations people living on reserve required a

written pass from their Indian Agent to leave the reserve for any reason. Parents required a pass to visit their children at residential school, and Indian Agents were encouraged to permit no more than four visits per year.[27] Government officials acknowledged that the pass system violated Canadian law; the architect of the system, Assistant Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed said, "I am adopting the system of keeping the Indians on their respective Reserves and not allowing any [to] leave them without passes—I know this is hardly supportable by any legal enactment but we must do many things which can only be supported by common sense."[28]

Paternalism: "Paternalism is the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm."[29]

Project Surname: Inuit naming systems are complex and imbued with spiritual meaning. Traditionally, Inuit did not use surnames. Project Surname was an attempt by the Canadian government to replace the Eskimo tag system and force all Inuit to have a surname for legal purposes. It began in 1970 when Abe Okpik, who was fluent in many dialects of Inuktitut, was hired to travel to Inuit communities to explain the program, answer questions and explain that people would get to choose their own surnames. Under this program, most Inuit chose the names of their ancestors as their surnames. Okpik worked with a linguist throughout this process in order to standardize spelling as much as possible. Critics of Project Surname point out that it ignored Inuit naming practices and forced European naming methods onto the Inuit. As well, women generally did not have a say in choosing their own surname in this process.[30]

Residential Schools: At the time of Confederation, Christian churches were already operating a small number of boarding schools for Indigenous children. With the expansion of settlement to the west, Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries established missions and boarding schools across the Prairies, in the North and in British Columbia. These schools were funded by per–student grants from the federal government. Sir John A Macdonald, a key architect and proponent of the residential school system, stated in 1879, "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
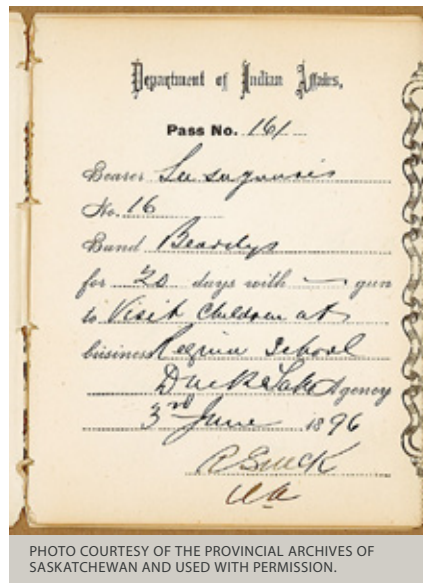

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF SASKATCHEWAN AND USED WITH PERMISSION.

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."[31] In 1883, the Government of Canada established three large schools in Western Canada, and the system continued to grow from there. By 1930, 80 schools were in operation across the country, a partnership between the Canadian government and the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement recognized 139 schools in total, and at least 150,000 First Nation, Métis and Inuit children attended residential school.[32] It is estimated that at least 6,000 children died at residential school.[33] Alberta was home to 25 schools.[34]

Sixties Scoop: This phrase refers to an era from the 1950s to the 1980s when Indigenous children were "scooped" from their families and communities.[35] The children were then adopted out into primarily non-Indigenous families across Canada, as well as the United States and internationally. This was due to a lack of understanding of Indigenous childrearing practices as well as an attempt at assimilation.[36] The Sixties Scoop was part of broader provincial government policies that ignored the needs and rights of Indigenous children and families. It is estimated that over 20,000 children were impacted by the Sixties Scoop, and it was most widespread in the Prairie provinces.[37] Many survivors of the Sixties Scoop have experienced abuse and ongoing struggles with identity.[38] In 2018, the Government of Alberta apologized to survivors for the Sixties Scoop.[39]

NEXT STEPS

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Indigenous Peoples and communities continue to feel the lasting impacts of policies of assimilation enacted by the Canadian government. This is seen primarily in the form of intergenerational trauma, which is when trauma and stress are passed from one generation to the next.[40] "Intergenerational trauma is usually seen within one family in which the parents or grandparents were traumatized, and each generation of that family continues to experience trauma in some form... Direct survivors of these experiences often transmit the trauma to later generations when they don't recognize or have the opportunity to address their issues. Over the course of time these behaviours, often destructive, become normalized within the family and their community, leading to the next generation suffering the same problems. Many Indigenous Peoples and communities are working to overcome the devastating impacts of attempted assimilation through a holistic approach to wellness, one that encompasses physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.[41] The continuation of First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures in the face of ongoing attempts at assimilation also speaks to the continued strength of Indigenous Peoples.

Continuing Your Learning Journey

a) *How might the legacy of intergenerational trauma continue to impact some Indigenous Peoples?*

b) *How does an understanding of some concepts and policies of assimilation contribute to the journey of reconciliation for educators?*

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Stepping Stones

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For additional resources and information on Walking Together, visit www.teachers.ab.ca.

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