



Stepping Stones



RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS—INUIT EXPERIENCE

Planning your learning journey

How did the residential school system experience impact the Inuit?



NWT ARCHIVES/FLEMING/N-1979-050: 0101

First year, school girls at All Saints School in Aklavik.

FIRST STEPS



The purpose of residential schools was to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into a colonial culture.¹ While the Inuit residential school experience was unique, the broader themes of colonization and assimilation remain constant.² Families were coerced or forced to send children far from home with little in the way of consultation or consent.³ The schools aggressively enforced the negation of rich cultural ways of being, knowing and doing. Students were shamed and punished for speaking, thinking and being Indigenous. The institutions were underfunded and understaffed, and students were prey to harsh emotional, physical, mental and spiritual discipline, disease and sexual abuse.⁴ Along with other enforced assimilation tactics, the residential school system was used as leverage over families to execute control over populations to ensure colonial rule and supremacy over land and people.



“Intergenerational or multigenerational trauma happens when the effects of trauma are not resolved in one generation. When trauma is ignored and there is no support for dealing with it, the trauma will be passed from one generation to the next.”⁵

HISTORY

Prior to 1960, schooling in the north is described as the “missionary era” in which Roman Catholic, Anglican and Moravian missionaries influenced education. In 1900 there were only two residential schools north of the 60th parallel, and by 1950 there were only six plus one hostel.

Inuit were not considered Indians as defined and controlled by the *Indian Act* until 1939 due to a prior lack of interest in their lands. Once Inuit came under the control of the *Indian Act*, Inuit health, welfare and education was to become a responsibility of the federal government, although Canada was reluctant to take on this role.⁶ Although taken as wards of the state, still to this day they do not receive the same entitlements as Status First Nations in such matters as education, health care and tax exemptions.

After World War II in 1945 and during the Cold War, the Canadian government began to assert sovereignty over the Arctic. Groups of Inuit families were forcibly relocated to the barren and inhospitable High Arctic. Relocated families were under the false premise that the move was temporary and they would be able to return home. The forced move happened in mid-winter. They had to live in tupiqs, summer homes made of animal skins, because rocks used to make winter homes were buried. Many died and many still suffer the long-term impacts of the severity of this forced relocation initiative.⁷

Between 1950 and 1960, the federal government undertook a major expansion of schooling in the North.⁸ After 1950, the federal government created a system of day schools and hostels under the direction of Northern Affairs, which led to a rapid and hostile transformation of traditional, land-based lifestyles and economies. The schools were not simply an extension of the already established southern residential school system.

Travelling extreme distances to attend schools often resulted in separation from families for years. Often schools were only accessible by boat or plane and extremely far away from students’ homes, which made contact with family members impossible. By 1964, the number of school-aged Inuit children attending residential schools had increased to over 75 per cent.⁹

Residential schools in the north were administered by northern governments from the 1970s to the late 1990s. Inuit, Gwich’in, Métis and Dene attended the schools. Many students later played leading roles in the creation of the new territory of Nunavut in 1999 and became premiers and ministers of northern governments.

HOSTELS

Day schools and small hostels in the eastern Arctic resulted in parents relocating on a year-round basis to be closer to their children. The western Arctic established large hostels that brought children from different regions and backgrounds together. The large and small hostels were distinct to the north. Small hostels were normally supervised by Inuit couples and housed 8–12 elementary-aged children. The intention of the small hostel was to be less disruptive to families and to combine Inuit with Euro-Christianized ways to transition Inuit into “modernity.” The large hostels schooled hundreds of children and were administered by the church or the federal government.

ARCTIC QUÉBEC: NUNAVIK RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Prior to 1960, Quebec government paid little attention to the Inuit (Nunavik). In the mid-1950s, the federal government built four hostels in northern Québec. The last federal

hostel in northern Québec closed in 1971. In 1975 the Inuit in northern Quebec gained control over their education system. At this point all schools in Nunavik were to be controlled by Kativik School Board.

LABRADOR

Missionary organizations established residential schooling for Inuit who had always lived on the land in what is now Labrador. When Newfoundland and Labrador joined Confederation in 1949, the two governments decided against extending the *Indian Act* to the Indigenous population of the new province.¹⁰ After 1949, the federal government began to take an active role in the financial operation, maintenance and management of services, which included educating the Inuit of Labrador. Many attended residential schools in communities far from home and share devastating experiences common to students of the Indian residential school system.¹¹ The last residential school in Labrador to close was in North West River in 1980.

IMPACTS

For Inuit, the residential school system was but one facet of a massive and rapid sweep of assimilation that included the introduction of Christianity; forced relocation and settlement; the slaughter of hundreds of sled dogs eliminating the only means of travel for many Inuit; the spread of tuberculosis and smallpox, and the corresponding mandatory southward medical transport; the introduction of RCMP throughout the Arctic; and other disruptions to the centuries-old Inuit way of life.¹² The sled dogs were also part of the family and knew their roles as providers, nurturers and protectors. The loss of a dog contributed to feelings of low self-worth.

Negative impacts for students and their descendants continue to resonate today. “Feelings of guilt and shame have compounded this tragedy, as most former students have suffered in silence for decades, afraid to speak out against those who exploited and abused them. Unfortunately, many of the negative impacts of residential school have been passed on to subsequent generations.”¹³

Being removed for long periods of time from family resulted in broken relationships. Many times young

children would forget who their parents were. On the other hand, older children would remember their parents yet resented returning to their parents' home as they had been taught to reject the parents' ways of life. "Inuit children were made to feel ashamed of their traditional way of life, and many acquired disdain for their parents, their culture, their centuries-old practices and beliefs and even for the food their parents provided."¹⁴ "The schools were quite conscious of the implications of the changes that they were introducing into northern communities."¹⁵

Due to impacts of colonization, conditions within communities had deteriorated to a point where some attributes of the schools seemed to be an improvement to new notions of poverty and famine that many were faced with. Friendships, opportunities to play sports and activities helped some students disconnect from negative impacts. Survivors and their families are on a path to healing and continually seeking support for wellness. They are overcoming feelings of fear and shame, breaking the silence, restoring family networks and addressing the disruption of language and cultural practice that resulted from the residential schools.¹⁶ Transference of knowledge and fracturing of family structures severely impacted the health and wellness of generations past and present. The original Inuit way of discipline was to shun from the traditional camp. Many students who returned home from

residential schools started to do what they had learned there—every form of abuse. A method to healing and reconciliation is *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ)*.

IQ is the term used to describe Inuit knowledge and world view. The term translates directly as "that which Inuit have always known to be true." The Inuit world view is one in which all living things are in unity: humans, land, animals and plants. *IQ* is a set of teachings that elders call the "Inuit law," which includes working together for the common good, respecting all living things, maintaining harmony and balance, and continually planning and preparing for the future.¹⁷ Despite the missionary and residential school era, *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* remains today.

LEGACY

Some steps have been taken to address the shameful legacy of residential schools. In the 1980s churches began atoning for their involvement through apologies or statements of regret. In 1998 the Aboriginal Healing Foundation was established to provide healing initiatives for survivors. In 2006 the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement resulted in financial compensation to survivors as well as the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC provided a safe place for survivors to tell their truths and mandated the creation of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. In 2008 Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a national Statement of Apology in the House of Commons. The TRC put forth 94 Calls to Action for all Canadians and all levels of government to come together and make a commitment to help repair the legacy of trauma caused by residential schools and move forward with reconciliation.

Initially, Labrador Inuit were not included in the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement. In September 2016, eight years after they were intentionally excluded from the national

apology and settlement package, the court ruled in favour of the Labrador Inuit class action lawsuit. One year later, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau formally apologized and acknowledged that words alone are not enough to heal the wounds of the past.¹⁸

Grand Chief Gregory Rich of the Innu Nation felt the apology in itself was too narrow as the suffering endured extends beyond the scope of residential schools. "They argue Innu people have also suffered under other institutions, like Mount Cashel Orphanage, and the provincial child protection system which exists today."¹⁹ Recently families who were forced to relocate to the High Arctic received a formal apology from the federal government, yet the actions to make amends with the legacy of trauma are yet to be seen.²⁰

NEXT STEPS



Reconciliation is about all Canadians understanding the truths of the past and working together to build a new future. We all have a responsibility to learn and acknowledge the truth about residential schools and to understand the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. Many schools demonstrate understanding of the history and legacy of residential schools by participating in cross-country projects such as Imagine a Canada, Project of Heart and Orange Shirt Day. Sharing posters, information and actively engaging in making the Calls to Action come to life is a necessary part of reconciliation. Respectfully inviting survivors to share their stories combined with seeking authentic Inuit developed resources is another way to participate in reconciliation.

Being aware of ongoing realities that continue to impact lives, such as food insecurity, lack of access to basic services, suicide rates, lack of clean drinking water, transportation issues, tuberculosis rates and lack of mental health supports, is essential to reconciliation, while taking action to help alleviate the impacts is also necessary.



NWT ARCHIVES/PIQTOUKUN, DAVID RUBEN AND ESTHER ATKIN RUBEN/N-1988-013: 0002

Image was taken at Baillie Island in 1930 and shows (l to r) Mona Thrasher (Billy Thrasher's first wife), his baby sister Misanik (deceased), Billy Thrasher, Mary Thrasher Kotokak of Tuktoyaktuk (deceased), Bertha Thrasher Ruben of Paulatuk (married Billy Ruben) and George Thrasher.

Continuing Your Learning Journey

a) How can understanding the Inuit residential school experience contribute to reconciliation?

b) How have the experiences of residential schools shaped contemporary realities for Inuit and communities?

FURTHER LEARNING

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NOTES

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