RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS—INUIT EXPERIENCE

Planning your learning journey

How did the residential school system experience impact the Inuit?

FIRST STEPS

The purpose of residential schools was to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into a colonial culture. While the Inuit residential school experience was unique, the broader themes of colonization and assimilation remain constant. Families were coerced or forced to send children far from home with little in the way of consultation or consent. 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. 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.
Between 1950 and 1960, the federal government undertook a major expansion of schooling in the North. 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. 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 Québec 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. 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. The last residential school in Labrador to close was in North West River in 1980.

IMPAIRS

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. 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.”

Being removed for long periods of time from family resulted in broken relationships. Many times young
Recently families is the term used to describe Inuit students who returned home from shun from the traditional camp. Many original Inuit way of discipline was to transference of knowledge and networks and addressing the disruption of language and cultural practice that resulted from the residential schools. Despite the missionary and residential school era, Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit remains today.

**LEGAL STIONS**

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. 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.” 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.

**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.
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


D. Legacy of Hope Foundation (LHF). 2010. We Were So Far Away: The Inuit Experience of Residential Schools. Gloucester, Ont: LHF.


Stepping Stones is a publication of the Alberta Teachers’ Association Walking Together Project intended to support certificated teachers on their learning journey to meet the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Foundational Knowledge competency in the Teaching Quality Standard.

Walking Together would like to acknowledge the contributions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit community members within Alberta in developing these resources. For additional resources and information on Walking Together, visit www.teachers.ab.ca.