"THEY CAN'T TAKE OUR ANCESTORS OUT OF US": A BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM, INCARCERATION, INSTITUTIONALIZED POLICIES AND LEGISLATIONS AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief history of the residential school system in Canada. One of Canada's key attempts to assimilate Indigenous peoples was through the use of "education" by the government and churches. For over 150 years thousands of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes, families and communities. This paper also focuses on the impact which these colonial schools and government policies had on Indigenous children, their families and communities. Many students who survived the schools have described a state of being incarcerated in them. This work demonstrates the fact that, despite the government's systematic and deliberate attempts to suppress Indigenous peoples and their cultures, its policies and actions have largely failed. Indigenous peoples continue to speak their own narratives, speak their own truths and revitalize and build on their knowledges and ancestral systems from their diverse perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Any examination of Indigenous Education in Canada must begin with the understanding that Indigenous peoples had, and still have, their own knowledge systems and philosophies of educating/teaching their children, as well as highly

complex, efficient and well-developed systems to help their children and society to function effectively. Before the arrival of Europeans, Aboriginal groups in North America were largely independent and self-governing. They determined their own philosophies and approaches to cultural, economic, religious, familial and educational endeavours (Bombay, Matheson and Anisman, 2009: 7).

These Indigenous knowledge systems were disrupted over 150 years ago, though, beginning in the mid-19th century, when First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were removed from their families and forced to attend Canada's residential schools. The residential school system is widely-recognized as having included industrial schools, boarding schools, and homes for students, including hostels and billets. However, it also included convents, day schools, mission schools, sanitoriums and settlement camps (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2010). The report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People of 1996 states that, of all the steps taken to achieve the assimilation of Indigenous peoples, none was more obviously a creature of Canada's paternalism toward Aboriginal people than its stern education program.

This paper provides a critical examination of the history of residential schools in Canada. It examines Canadian federal government policies against Indigenous peoples, the experiences of the children who were forced to attend these colonial schools, and the overall impact of the schools on their families and communities.

As an Indigenous person from the Caribbean, I have learned of many students' experiences in Canadian residential schools. This understanding came from my own family members who are Mushkegowuk and Anishinabe peoples, and who are survivors of the schools. Many people who did not attend these schools, including my own children and other family members, experience lingering intergenerational trauma. The Legacy of Hope Foundation (2003) defines intergenerational trauma or multigenerational trauma as the unresolved effect of trauma in a generation. Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman (2009: 14) further assert that it is difficult to disassociate the impact of traumatic experiences of one generation from the effects of adverse events which are encountered in subsequent generations.

A character on a recent television show noted that "Memories have a long life. My people, they never forget." This resonated with me and reinforced the notion of ancestral memory. I recall reading narratives of people who were enslaved and taken to Indigenous Taino territory in the Caribbean. I became absorbed in their stories and was so affected that, long after reading them, I could see people bound on the ship, their voices crying out in pain and resistance. I could not understand what was happening until I connected with an Elder and realized that I was experiencing ancestral or blood memory. I saw and heard the voices of the ancestors. My young son said, in response to the same television show, "Mom, people do remember."

A survivor of a Quebec residential school stated, "The time has come for words that are necessary and just" (Grey and Gros-Lous Monier, 2010: 5). It is in this spirit that I write this article. I present words and ideas that are necessary and just in the hope that they might lead to actions that are necessary and just.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL HISTORY/POLICIES OF ASSIMILATION

The residential schools extend as far back as the 1600s, to the early days of Christian missionary work in North America. Some mission schools were set up during the mid-17th century, shortly after Europeans came in contact with Indigenous peoples (Kanai Board of Education: 2006). These mission schools aimed to assimilate Indigenous people by using Christianity to "civilize" the "savages."

The Bagot Commission report of 1842-1844 was one of the earliest official documents to recommend education as a means of ridding the Canadian colonies, soon to be the Dominion of Canada, of Indigenous peoples. It proposed that agriculture-based boarding schools which were placed far from parental influence would be the most effective means of achieving this. The children would need to learn English, manual labour and Christian values (RCAP: 1996; Aboriginal Healing Foundation: 2002). Indian Affairs Superintendent T. G. Anderson elaborated on these ideas in 1846 when he told the General Council of Chiefs and *Principle Men* in Orillia, Ontario, that "your children shall be sent to Schools, where they will forget their Indian habits and be instructed in all the necessary arts of civilized life, and become one with your white brethren" (Baldwin, 1846: 7). In 1847, Egerton Ryerson, the influential Chief Superintendent of Education in Upper Canada reinforced this when he, called for Indigenous children to be sent far away from their homes and free of parental influence.

During the new Canadian nation's first few decades, when the government should have been addressing its constitutional responsibility to Indigenous peoples and the lands *assigned* to them by the *Constitution Act, 1867*, it adopted a policy of assimilation. It supported residential schools which cut First Nations' children's ties to home and family, and placed them in the context of decades of aggressive assimilation practices of the government and various churches (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996). In 1876 the government implemented the Eurocentric and colonialist *Indian Act*, which was imposed on Indigenous peoples and banned Indigenous spiritual and cultural practices.

In 1879, the lawyer, journalist and aspiring politician Nicholas Flood Davin was sent by the then Canadian Prime Minister John A. Macdonald to examine the school system for Indigenous people in the United States. Davin liked the system of industrial schools that existed there and reported "If anything is to be done with the Indian, we must get them while they are young." Davin argued that only in Indigenous children could hope for the future reside, for only children could undergo "the transformation from the natural condition to that of civilization" (RCAP, 1996).

Canada's colonial residential school system began *officially* in 1892, and many government officials and church leaders argued that assimilation of Indigenous peoples needed to start with the children. For example, in 1912 the Archbishop of St. Boniface asserted that Aboriginal people needed to be "caught young to be saved from what is on the whole the degenerating influence of their home environment" (RCAP 1996). The racist treatment of Aboriginal people through Canadian social policy had been framed from within pervasive colonial and assimilationist policies where it had been designed to achieve what Duncan Campbell Scott, the bureaucrat in charge of Canada's *Indian* policy, described as "the elimination of the Indian question." The forcible removal of Indigenous children from their homes was part of the government's plan and, in 1920, Scott revised the *Indian Act* to make attendance at residential school mandatory for all children up to 15 years of age (RCAP, 1996; Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2003). Thus, it was through Aboriginal children that the Canadian government tried to achieve its objectives (Bennett *et al.*, 2005: 9).

EXPERIENCES

Indigenous parents were forced to accept their children's removal from the home under threat of legal action (Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series by Madeleine Dion Stout and Gregory Kipling, 2003: 33). They were devastated by the separation from their children, and their pain was amplified when they learned that their children were likely to be abused by school officials. Friends told me that, as children, they were removed from their homes without explanation, siblings were separated, they were bewildered and confused, and their parents were devastated at the loss of their children. In many cases, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police assisted in the removal of Indigenous children from their homes. They encircled reserves to stop runaways, and then went door-to-door, taking school-age children over the protests of parents and the children themselves (Bennett *et al.*, 2005).

When school attendance became mandatory some families withdrew into their traditional territories to keep their children away from the churches and schools. I heard many stories about parents who, knowing that government officials were coming, hid their children to protect them. It then became punishable by law not only for the children to be out of school, but also for parents to withhold children from attending these schools. Furthermore, under the *Indian Act*, Indigenous peoples could not hire lawyers to help contest government actions, so reinforcing Canada's paternalistic policies and the systemic marginalization of Indigenous peoples.

Deep-rooted power dynamics were embedded in the residential school system. For instance, parents could be arrested for not sending their children to these schools, and Indian agents often withheld food from, and asserted power and control over, Indigenous peoples. Once children entered these schools, siblings were separated. Their hair was cut, and many were punished for speaking their ancestral language. The schools were poorly built and the children's living conditions were poor. Many described the environment as being overcrowded, with much physical, sexual and psychological violence and abuse and death (Aboriginal Healing Foundation: 2001; Bennett *et al.*, 2005: 44; RCAP, 1996). They were starved as part of an ill-conceived experiment, their health care was neglected, and they were subjected to such indignities as a home-made electric chair as entertainment for staff (Mosby, 2013; Fontaine, Dan and Farber, 2013;

Carpenter 2013; Sproule-Jones, 1995:199; Miller, 1996). It is estimated that thousands of children died in these schools, and the death rate in some schools was as high as 64% (see RCAP: 1996, Milloy: 1999). Indigenous languages came under attack, and English and French were imposed on Indigenous children. Parents had no control over the choice to send their children to the residential schools or over what their children learned there, and the critical skills needed for parenting were not handed down to the children. These measures, together, had devastating effects on Indigenous families, culture and society (Battiste, 2000; Bennett *et al.*, 2005). The residential school system was one of the most damaging colonial policies in the lives of Indigenous peoples.

Thus, the residential school system was a well-orchestrated and deliberate scheme by the government and churches to assimilate Indigenous peoples. John Milloy at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal on First Nations Child Funding said that, "the residential school system was not only about separating children from parents, it was about cutting the artery of culture that flowed between children parents and community."

Many Indigenous people have stated that they wanted schooling that provided skills to their children and was free of abuse, just as the non-Aboriginal children received. Indigenous people reinforced this point in the comment that "They wanted a system based upon consent, not coercion and they did not request cultural assimilation, nor did they request for their children physical and sexual abuse, deprivation, and humiliation" (Kanai Board of Education *et al.* 2006).

The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba noted that some communities had all of their children forcibly removed. They characterized the residential school system as a "conscious, deliberate and often brutal attempt to force Aboriginal people to assimilate." They added that currently, "for the first time in over 100 years, many families are experiencing a generation of children who live with their parents until their teens" (Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2002: 2).

This history has had a devastating impact on the children, their parents' families and communities. It has been particularly tragic when the Indigenous epistemologies of children are taken into account.

LEGACY/IMPACT OF THE SCHOOLS

Some people consider that residential schools are in the past, but this is a misconception (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002). While the schools may be physically closed, the legacy lingers. Moreover, many current-day institutions such as the justice system, child welfare and the education systems are structured in a way that continue to undermine and systematically deny Indigenous peoples their inherent rights as First Peoples. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2002: 2) reminds us that, residential school systems did not operate in isolation. Rather, they "constituted one piece of a larger policy puzzle." The Healing Foundation asserts further that "where the residential school system left off in the effort to solve the 'Indian Problem,' the Indian Act and the Child Welfare, Reservation, and Justice systems took over." It is these larger relationships, and the forced assimilationist policy that informs them, which account for much of the varied conditions of Aboriginal peoples life.

The challenges which the residential school policies of extermination have imposed on Indigenous peoples are very complex. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux and Magdalena Smolewski (2004) point out how the residential schools introduced certain features to Indigenous communities, and those features have been passed on from generation to generation. These are spoken of collectively as the intergenerational legacy of the residential school system, and they are the consequences of the policy of forced assimilation. According to the RCAP (1996), "the very language in which the vision of residential schools systems was couched revealed what would have to be the essentially violent nature of the school system in its assault on child and culture." The basic premise of resocialization, of the great transformation from "savage" to "civilized," was violent. Milloy (2013) reinforced the point that there was savagery and violence in the very idea of residential school itself. Many people had their identity impacted, their parenting and cultures destroyed, and experienced trauma. Yet, the residential school is just one aspect of the government's assimilationist policy against Indigenous people. According to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2006: 11), it was a deliberate systemic effort to remove generations of Aboriginal children one by one from their family, community, language, culture and Aboriginal way of living and being in the world.

Some members of Indigenous communities still relive the memories of children being taken from their parents. Many friends share with me how they bare suspicions and anxiety even in contemporary contexts. Child welfare services still take children from their parents, families and communities today. For example, a friend of mine told me that his nine-year-old got into a fight at school with another child, and instead of calling the parents, the school called child welfare. It is well known among Indigenous peoples that there are more Indigenous children in care throughout Canada today than the numbers who were in residential schools (see Blackstock, 2007). Bennett *et al.* (2005) note that "the First Nations political mandate has been to reclaim full jurisdiction over matters relating to our children and families, and this remains the goal of First Nations in Canada today." This is demonstrated in the many examples led and organized by Indigenous people to have control over the rights of their children. That includes setting up their own child welfare system, gaining control of their children's educational life and schooling, as well as the various community programs and schools that focus on Indigenous cultures and languages.

According to the RCAP (1996), there are many reasons why assimilation policies have failed to eliminate the "Indian problem." However, the strength, commitment and courage of generations of Indigenous peoples in Canada played a key role in preventing all Aboriginal peoples from being totally assimilated and disappearing into the dominant Canadian society. As a friend poignantly stated, "They can't take our ancestors out of us." During the Walk for Reconciliation on September 22, 2013, in British Columbia, civil rights activist Bernice King reminded everyone, "This is no time for apathy or complacency." She added that "we are tied in an inescapable network of mutuality, caught in a single garment of destiny and what affects one person here in Canada – no matter their background – directly affects all indirectly" (Canadian Press, 2013). In the words of one survivor who attended residential school in Quebec, "I was never ashamed of being an Aboriginal person even if the residential school almost succeeded. My ancestors gave me strength and patience. We must ensure that the things that happened are remembered. I wonder if Canadians really want to hear the truth. There are still those who deny the history of the residential schools" (Grey and Gros-Lous Monier, 2010: 6).

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