

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

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Historical Foundations of the Residential School System

The **residential school system** represents one of the most significant and distressing chapters in the history of Canada, beginning its formal operations in the 19th century and continuing for over a hundred years. These institutions were not merely educational facilities but were part of a broader, state-sponsored initiative designed to fundamentally alter the demographic and cultural landscape of the nation. The primary objective, as documented by historical researchers, was the **systematic assimilation of Indigenous populations** into the dominant Euro-Canadian society. This policy was rooted in the ethnocentric belief that Indigenous cultures were inferior and that the "civilizing" influence of Western education and Christian values was necessary for the survival of Indigenous individuals within a modernizing state.

The governance of these schools was a collaborative effort between the **Canadian government** and various Christian denominations, including the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, and Presbyterian churches. While the government provided the bulk of the funding and legislative framework, the daily operations and pedagogical approaches were managed by religious authorities. This partnership created an environment where the state's political goals of national unity and land acquisition were intertwined with the churches' missionary zeal. The resulting infrastructure was a network of boarding schools that stretched across the country, effectively isolating children from their ancestral lands and traditional influences to facilitate a total cultural transformation.

The legislative backbone of this system was the Indian Act, which granted the government wide-reaching powers over the lives of Indigenous peoples. Under this mandate, attendance at **residential schools** eventually became compulsory for many Indigenous children, who were often forcibly removed from their homes by government officials. This forced separation was the first step in a process intended to sever the connection between generations. By removing children from the influence of their parents and elders, the system aimed to ensure that the **cultural practices** and traditional knowledge of Indigenous communities would not be passed down, thereby achieving the long-term goal of total assimilation into **mainstream culture**.

The Ideology and Mechanics of Forced Assimilation

The core ideology driving the residential school system was the belief that **Indigenous identity** was an obstacle to the progress of the Canadian state. Policy makers and school administrators operated under the assumption that by immersing children in a Europeanized environment, they could "kill the Indian in the child." This process involved a rigorous and often punitive enforcement of Western norms, ranging from the clothes the children wore to the names they were called. Upon arrival, students were frequently stripped of their traditional clothing, had their hair cut in European styles, and were given new, English or French names, or in some cases, simply assigned numbers

to replace their identities.

Language played a central role in this **systematic assimilation**. Students were strictly forbidden from speaking their native languages, and those who were caught doing so often faced severe physical punishment. The goal was to replace Indigenous linguistic diversity with the official languages of the state, thereby facilitating a more complete integration into the economic and social structures of Canada. This **loss of language** had profound psychological and social consequences, as it created a communication barrier between the children and their families, effectively orphaning a generation within their own communities and contributing to a lasting **detrimental effect** on their sense of self.

Beyond language and appearance, the schools sought to dismantle the spiritual and social structures of Indigenous life. Traditional ceremonies, such as the Potlatch or the Sun Dance, were banned or disparaged as "heathen" practices. In their place, the schools imposed a strict regimen of Christian religious instruction and manual labor. The curriculum was often rudimentary, focusing more on domestic skills for girls and agricultural or trade skills for boys, reflecting a systemic effort to relegate Indigenous populations to the lower rungs of the Canadian socioeconomic hierarchy. This deliberate limitation of educational opportunities was a key component of the **long-term impacts** that would later manifest in widespread economic disparities.

Living Conditions and the Reality of Institutional Life

The daily reality for children within **residential schools** was often characterized by deprivation, neglect, and a lack of basic human comforts. Many institutions were chronically underfunded, leading to overcrowded dormitories, poor sanitation, and inadequate nutrition. The **Canadian government**, while mandating attendance, frequently failed to provide the necessary resources to ensure the health and safety of the students. Consequently, these schools became breeding grounds for infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza, which claimed the lives of thousands of children. In many cases, parents were not notified of their children's illnesses or deaths, and many students were buried in unmarked graves on school grounds.

The institutional environment was designed to be rigid and impersonal, emphasizing discipline and obedience over care and nurturing. Children were often subjected to a militaristic schedule, with every hour of their day strictly monitored and controlled. This lack of emotional support and the absence of parental figures created a vacuum that was frequently filled by fear and anxiety. For many students, the school was not a place of learning but a place of survival, where the primary lesson was the suppression of their own emotions and the endurance of hardship. This environment laid the groundwork for the **profound effect** on the mental health of survivors that would persist long after the schools were closed.

Furthermore, the segregation of children by gender within the schools further disrupted the natural

social and familial structures of Indigenous communities. Siblings were often separated and forbidden from interacting, which exacerbated the sense of isolation and loneliness. This disruption of **family ties** was a deliberate strategy to weaken the social fabric of Indigenous nations, making it easier for the state to manage and assimilate the population. The cumulative effect of these living conditions was a deep-seated sense of alienation, as children were caught between a culture they were being forced to abandon and a society that refused to fully accept them.

The Prevalence of Abuse and Systematic Trauma

One of the most harrowing aspects of the **residential school system** was the widespread prevalence of physical, **psychological abuse**, and **sexual abuse**. Survivors have come forward with countless accounts of the brutality they faced at the hands of teachers, administrators, and religious officials. Discipline was often meted out with extreme violence, and even minor infractions of the strict school rules could result in severe beatings. This culture of violence was normalized within the institutions, creating a permanent state of trauma for the children who were trapped within them. The lack of oversight and accountability allowed predators to operate with impunity, leaving many students with deep emotional and physical scars.

The **psychological abuse** was equally damaging, as children were constantly told that their heritage was shameful and that their families were inferior. This constant barrage of negativity was intended to erode their **cultural identity** and instill a sense of self-loathing. The trauma of being told that everything they knew and loved was wrong had a **detrimental effect** on their cognitive and emotional development. Many survivors report struggling with feelings of worthlessness and confusion, as the very people charged with their care and education were the sources of their deepest pain and humiliation.

The impact of this abuse was not limited to the individual's time in school; it fundamentally altered their ability to form healthy relationships and trust others in adulthood. The betrayal of trust by authority figures--especially those representing the church and the state--left a lasting legacy of skepticism and fear. This systematic trauma is a primary factor in the high rates of mental health challenges observed in Indigenous communities today. Recognizing the extent of this abuse is crucial for understanding the **social wellbeing** of survivors and the ongoing need for specialized, trauma-informed support services to address the **long-term impacts** of the system.

Psychological Impacts and the Crisis of Identity

The **residential school system** had a **profound effect** on the psychological development of Indigenous children, often leading to what has been described as "Residential School Syndrome." This condition encompasses a range of symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including anxiety, depression, flashbacks, and emotional numbing. Because the trauma

occurred during critical developmental stages, it interfered with the children's ability to regulate their emotions and develop a stable sense of self. The loss of a nurturing family environment and the imposition of a hostile institutional identity left many survivors feeling profoundly lost and disconnected from both their own culture and the **mainstream culture** of Canada.

The **identity crisis** experienced by survivors is a direct result of the government's **systematic assimilation** policies. By the time many students left the residential schools, they had been away from their communities for so long that they no longer spoke their native languages or understood their traditional customs. However, they were still faced with systemic racism and discrimination in broader Canadian society, which prevented them from fully integrating into the mainstream. This state of "liminality"--belonging to neither world--led to a deep sense of alienation and a struggle to find a meaningful place in society. This lack of belonging is a significant contributor to the **long-term impacts** on the psychological health of Indigenous populations.

The destruction of the self-concept was not an accidental byproduct but a central goal of the residential school system. By attacking the foundation of **Indigenous identity**, the system sought to make the children easier to govern and less likely to resist the state's encroachment on their lands and rights. The psychological fallout of this policy has been **devastating**, manifesting in high levels of chronic stress and a diminished capacity for resilience. Healing from this level of identity-based trauma requires not only individual therapy but also a collective process of cultural reclamation and the restoration of traditional knowledge systems.

Intergenerational Trauma and the Erosion of Family Ties

Perhaps the most insidious legacy of the **residential schools** is the phenomenon of **intergenerational trauma**. The trauma experienced by the students did not end with them; it was passed down to their children and grandchildren, creating a cycle of suffering that continues to affect **Indigenous populations** today. Because survivors were raised in an environment devoid of parental love and healthy role models, many struggled to develop the parenting skills necessary to nurture their own children. The patterns of abuse, neglect, and emotional distance they learned in the schools were often inadvertently repeated in their own homes, perpetuating the **disruption in family ties** across generations.

The systemic **disruption in cultural practices** also played a role in the transmission of trauma. When a generation is prevented from learning their traditions, they are unable to pass on the cultural tools and coping mechanisms that have historically provided resilience to their communities. This loss of cultural continuity left subsequent generations vulnerable to the same psychological and social challenges faced by the survivors. The breakdown of the traditional family unit, which was the cornerstone of Indigenous social structure, has had a **detrimental effect** on the stability and health of entire communities, leading to a fragmented social fabric that is still being

mended today.

Addressing **intergenerational trauma** requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes the historical roots of modern social issues. It is not enough to treat the symptoms in individuals; the underlying causes rooted in the **residential school system** must be acknowledged. Support systems must focus on family reunification and the revitalization of Indigenous parenting practices to break the cycle of trauma. By understanding how the schools systematically undermined the family, we can better appreciate the necessity of **ongoing support** for community-led healing initiatives that prioritize the restoration of **family ties** and cultural heritage.

Socioeconomic Consequences and Public Health Disparities

The **long-term effects** of the residential school system are clearly visible in the stark socioeconomic and public health disparities that characterize the lives of many Indigenous people in Canada today. Statistics show that **Indigenous populations** are disproportionately affected by **poverty**, housing insecurity, and unemployment. These issues are not coincidental but are the direct result of a policy that intentionally limited the education and economic opportunities available to Indigenous children. By providing a substandard education focused on manual labor, the schools effectively barred generations of Indigenous people from participating in the broader economy on equal terms.

Public health outcomes among survivors and their descendants are also deeply concerning. There are significantly higher rates of **substance abuse** and **suicide** within Indigenous communities compared to the general Canadian population. These issues are often used as coping mechanisms for the deep-seated trauma and pain caused by the residential school experience. The **disruption caused by the residential school system** led to a loss of traditional health practices and a deep mistrust of Western medical institutions, which can further exacerbate health problems. The **social wellbeing** of these populations is inextricably linked to the historical trauma they have endured.

Furthermore, the economic marginalization of Indigenous communities has created a barrier to accessing high-quality healthcare and mental health services. The cycle of **poverty** and poor health is difficult to break without significant intervention and **ongoing support** from the **Canadian government**. Recognizing that these modern challenges are a direct result of historical policies is essential for developing effective public health strategies. Addressing these disparities requires a commitment to social justice and a redistribution of resources to ensure that Indigenous communities have the tools they need to achieve economic self-sufficiency and improved health outcomes.

Cultural Erosion and the Struggle for Reclamation

The **residential school system** was a direct assault on the cultural sovereignty of Indigenous nations, leading to a widespread **detrimental effect** on their languages, stories, and traditions. For many communities, the loss of fluent speakers has brought their languages to the brink of extinction, which represents a profound loss of human knowledge and cultural diversity. Language is the primary vehicle for culture, and its suppression was a calculated move to ensure that Indigenous worldviews would be replaced by Western ones. The **loss of cultural identity** has made it difficult for many Indigenous people to connect with their heritage and find strength in their ancestral traditions.

Despite these efforts, Indigenous communities have shown remarkable resilience in their struggle to reclaim and revitalize their cultures. In recent decades, there has been a significant movement to bring back traditional languages, ceremonies, and governance structures. This process of cultural reclamation is a vital part of the healing process, as it allows individuals to rebuild their sense of self and community. However, the **lasting impacts** of the schools mean that this work is often difficult and requires significant resources. The **ongoing support** of the government and society at large is necessary to ensure that these cultural revitalization efforts are successful.

The process of reclamation also involves challenging the narratives of the past and ensuring that the true history of the **residential schools** is known and acknowledged. This includes the work of researchers, elders, and survivors who are documenting the **cultural practices** that were nearly lost and teaching them to the younger generation. By restoring the connection to the past, Indigenous communities are asserting their right to a future defined by their own values and traditions. This cultural strength is a powerful antidote to the **long-term effects** of **systematic assimilation**, providing a foundation for a renewed sense of pride and purpose.

The Path to Reconciliation and the Need for Ongoing Support

In recent years, Canada has begun a formal process of reconciliation, sparked in large part by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC's findings highlighted the **devastating** and **long-term impacts** of the **residential school system** and provided a roadmap for moving forward. Central to this process is the recognition of the harm caused by the government and the churches, and the need for a sincere apology and reparations. However, reconciliation is not a single event but an ongoing process that requires a fundamental shift in the relationship between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples.

One of the key requirements for reconciliation is the provision of **ongoing support** for survivors and their families. This includes funding for mental health services, language revitalization programs, and community-led healing initiatives. It also requires a commitment to addressing the

systemic inequalities that continue to marginalize **Indigenous populations**. The **social, psychological, and economic effects** of the schools are still very much present, and they cannot be resolved without sustained effort and investment. True reconciliation involves more than just words; it requires concrete actions that empower Indigenous communities to lead their own recovery.

Education is another critical component of the path to reconciliation. It is essential that all Canadians learn about the history and legacy of the **residential schools** to foster a greater understanding and empathy. By acknowledging the **profound effect** these schools had on the **Indigenous population**, society can begin to dismantle the prejudices and stereotypes that have long justified their mistreatment. The **Canadian Encyclopedia** and other educational resources play a vital role in this process by providing accurate and accessible information about this dark chapter in history. Ultimately, reconciliation is about building a future based on mutual respect, justice, and the full recognition of Indigenous rights.

Conclusion: Reflecting on the Long-Term Impacts

The **residential school system** was a deliberate and **systematic assimilation** policy that has left an indelible mark on Canada's history and its **Indigenous populations**. From its inception in the 19th century to the closure of the final school in the late 20th century, the system caused a **significant disruption** in the lives of thousands of children, families, and communities. The **long-term impacts** are felt today in the form of **intergenerational trauma**, socioeconomic disparities, and a continued struggle for cultural reclamation. Recognizing the **detrimental effect** of these schools is the first step toward understanding the contemporary challenges faced by Indigenous peoples.

The resilience of **Indigenous populations** in the face of such adversity is a testament to the strength of their cultures and their enduring connection to their heritage. Despite the state's best efforts to erase their identities, Indigenous people continue to assert their presence and fight for their rights. The **profound effect** of the residential schools serves as a reminder of the dangers of state-mandated assimilation and the importance of protecting cultural diversity. As Canada continues its journey toward reconciliation, it is imperative that the voices of survivors remain at the center of the conversation, ensuring that the lessons of the past are never forgotten.

In conclusion, the legacy of the **residential schools** is a complex and painful one that requires **ongoing support** and a commitment to justice. By addressing the **social, psychological, and economic effects** of this system, Canada can begin to heal the wounds of the past and build a more equitable future. The **lasting impacts** of the residential school system will be felt for generations to come, but through collective action and a dedication to truth, there is hope for a path forward that honors the dignity and sovereignty of all Indigenous peoples. The work of

reconciliation is a responsibility shared by all, requiring a continuous effort to right the wrongs of the past and ensure that such a system is never repeated.

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