

FOCUS



This section will help you understand

- the nature and purpose of residential schools
- the long-term impact of these schools on Aboriginal peoples.

At the Indian residential school, we were not allowed to speak our language; we weren't allowed to dance, sing because they told us it was evil. It was evil for us to practise any of our cultural ways.

—Kamloops Indian Residential School student.

The Purpose of Residential Schools

By the Indian Act, the federal government had responsibility for providing educational services to Aboriginal children. Beginning in the mid 1800s, the government began establishing what would become the residential school system. The schools were funded by the government but were operated by the Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and United churches. By 1931, the churches were operating 80 residential schools across the country, as well as day schools on some reserves.

For the federal government, the schools were another cornerstone in its policy of assimilating Aboriginal peoples into mainstream society. Aboriginal children were removed from their homes and lived in these residential schools. Officials believed that the best way to assimilate the children was to separate them from their families, communities, and culture. The schools were also meant to promote economic **self-sufficiency** by teaching Aboriginal children to become farmers and labourers.

The goal of missionaries who taught at the schools was to convert the children to Christianity. Children were often severely punished for practising traditional spiritual beliefs. Aboriginal peoples sent their children to the schools because they wanted them to receive an education. Many parents believed their children needed the skills to participate in the new economy and society.

Life at the schools was often harsh and rules were strict. Much of the day was spent in Christian religious instruction, learning English or French, doing chores such as laundry and kitchen work,

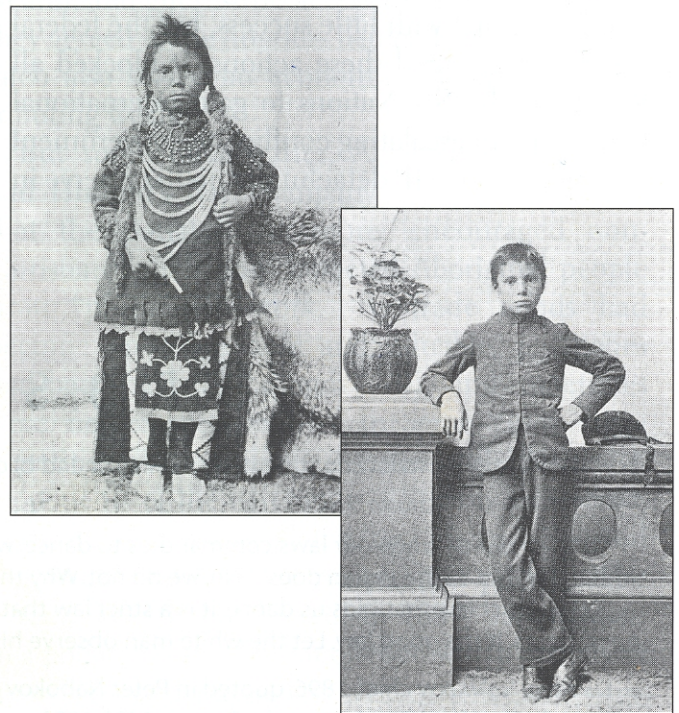


Figure 17-1 These photographs from 1896 show Thomas Moore, a young Aboriginal boy, before he attended a residential school in Regina and after he had been at the school for some time. Officials and missionaries often used photographs like these to show the radical change brought about by the “benefits” of the residential schools.

and learning some practical skills. Boys were taught farming and some trade skills such as carpentry and blacksmithing. Girls learned household skills such as sewing and cooking. The schools typically spent less than two hours per day on academic subjects. Many students felt the system left them ill-prepared for life outside the schools.

Lasting Impacts

For the most part, students received a poor education at residential schools. In 1945, for example, few students completed grade 9 and over 40% of the teaching staff had no professional training. Many children died of illnesses or caught diseases such as tuberculosis which destroyed their health. In an environment where they were often poorly fed and ill-treated, students did not learn well. Many parents began withdrawing their children from the schools and refusing to participate in the system. The schools were not phased out, however, until the 1960s.

Residential schools have had a devastating long-term effect on Aboriginal people and their communities. The schools broke the connection between children and their parents and culture. Many children, unable to reconnect to their family and culture after the enforced isolation and anti-Aboriginal instruction, rejected their past. Others suffered from the effects of physical, sexual, and psychological



Figure 17-2 This photo of a dining room in a residential school reflects the strict supervision and table manners. Boys and girls were separated.

abuse. In 1996, the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples pointed to residential schools as a major factor in the high rates of substance abuse, suicide, and family problems among Aboriginal peoples. On the other hand, many students have begun the healing process or have moved on to lead successful and healthy lives.



E y e W i t n e s s

These quotations, from students at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia 1907 to 1963, describe their feelings and experiences.

Before I left [home], I was full of confidence; I could do everything that was needed to be done at home. ...But when I arrived here all that left me. I felt so helpless. The Shuswap language was no use to me ... the supervisors couldn't understand.

I was punished quite a bit because I spoke my language... I was put in a corner and punished and sometimes, I was just given bread and water... Or they'd try to embarrass us and they'd put us in front of the whole class.

...Leona came and we were all talking Shuswap... She said to us, "You're never to get caught talking your language... You'll get whipped; you'll really get punished"... So we were careful after that not to be caught speaking... When we were way out there, we'd talk together in our language.

Something I remember is that I was always hungry. I lost weight there. I gained ten to twelve pounds in two months at home.

They censored all our letters... They would make a big speech if we complained about food in a letter. There wasn't very many that complained... 'cause we knew it wouldn't get out anyway.

—Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Tillacum Library, 1988).

RECONNECT



1. Identify ways in which residential schools differ from your school.
2. List ways residential schools encouraged or forced students to lose their Aboriginal identity.
3. Explain in a paragraph how residential schools caused social problems in Aboriginal communities.