Indigenous Women’s Experiences of the Canadian Residential School System

Karli Robertson

Canadian and Indigenous Studies, Trent University, 1600 West Bank Drive, Peterborough, K9J0G2, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

In Canada, over 150 000 Indigenous children attended residential school from the mid 19th century to the end of the 20th century. Female students were not only subjected to abuse within the schools due to the identity as Indigenous children, but also due to their gender within patriarchal society. These abuses did not end when the students left the schools, as the traumas left long-lasting effects of Indigenous women’s sense of identities. This essay provides an overview of the patriarchal policies within the residential school system, the types of abuses that Indigenous girls endured within the schools and how this abuse became sexually oriented in many cases. This paper concludes by looking towards the future through recognizing the central roles that Indigenous women and communities are playing in breaking this cycle of trauma. This is occurring through healing movements which reflect traditional cultural practices and languages in order to strengthen pride in Indigenous identities and create a brighter future for not only ourselves, but our future generations.

Keywords: Abuse, Canada, Healing, Indigenous women, Residential Schools, Resurgence

The Canadian residential school system had profound effects on female Indigenous students and how they viewed themselves. At the schools, girls were made to feel inferior and worthless, and many were haunted by this image of themselves for the rest of their lives. This
essay looks into the negative and long-lasting effects these schools had on Indigenous girls. First, it provides an overview of the residential school system and how its patriarchal policies were designed to take away Indigenous peoples’ control over their children’s education. From the perspective of government and church officials, Indigenous people were deemed inferior, primitive peoples who prevented “civilization” by educating their own children.1 Secondly, this essay will examine the abuse that Indigenous girls endured within the schools, both from school officials and lateral violence from other students. They were the victims of abuse simply because of their identity as Indigenous children; that in itself was considered a crime as it was resistance against the white colonialist system. Next, this essay shows that this abuse became sexually oriented in many cases. Female students were targeted and discriminated against by the school officials and fellow students due to their gender, which also caused them to have difficulty entering into healthy relationships in their adulthood. This essay will then document how these memories of abuse continued to trouble the residential school survivors throughout their lives and often led Indigenous girls onto a path filled with self-destruction and pain. Lastly, I will emphasize how changes are being implemented within Indigenous communities today to break the cycle of trauma and promote healing and pride for Indigenous heritage among residential school survivors and their family members. Indigenous communities are collectively working on healing movements which seek to revive cultural practices and languages in order to strengthen identities and help Indigenous peoples find inner peace. These movements hope to not only find healing within our communities presently, but also provide a brighter future for the generations to come, and it is the women who are leading the way. Though this essay will show that Indigenous girls were the victims of a colonialist residential school system that sought to enforce the European patriarchal view of society onto them by stripping them of their traditional roles, culture, value, and worth with their own communities, this essay also argues that Indigenous girls and women are currently playing a central role in healing within Indigenous communities.

Until 1884 attending residential schools had been voluntary, however in 1884 an amendment was made to the Indian Act making attendance to residential schools mandatory for all Indigenous children aged four to sixteen.2 This government action thus robbed the children and their families of this decision of whether or not to attend the schools. Though the Canadian residential schools had been running since the early 19th century by Christian churches, as stated above, attendance had been voluntary and as the result very few Indigenous children had chosen to attend.3 Many parents were unwilling to send their young children to the schools when requested, so very often children were forcibly ripped from the parent’s loving arms by the Indian agents themselves and would not see each other again for many months or often years.4 Poor, single mothers were targeted by the Indian agents, as it was believed that as women, they were unfit to raise their children alone. So therefore sending the children to the schools would be the more civilized option.5 This belief that women were unfit to raise their children alone is directly connected to the idea of patriarchy and walks hand in hand with colonialism. Within Indigenous societies women were traditionally the primary caregivers for young children as childbearing and

1 John Milloy, A National Crime (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999), 37.
4 Johnston, 7.
5 Johnston, 8.
Caring for the family was viewed as women’s work and highly respected. Colonialism and patriarchy strove to devalue all Indigenous women and their roles as mothers and caregivers by creating separate spheres for each sex and placing men as the head of the households. By making men the only voice for Indigenous peoples it created a hierarchy that did not exist before European contact and this new division of power left women voiceless in a society which was designed to discriminate against them. As Basil Johnston states, that when their children were taken away, many women’s hearts broke as there was “nothing, absolutely nothing that they could do, as women and as Indians, to reverse the decision of the Department.” However, the forced removal of Indigenous children from their homes was just the beginning of the genocide and government’s domination over Indigenous families and their education. Once children walked through the doors of the residential schools, a whole other terror ensued.

Considerable amount of the abuse that female Indigenous children endured within the schools was due to their race as the system believed that being an “Indian” was to be primitive, and therefore anything to do with this preserving this identity was a crime. The school system was designed by the government with the intent of “civilizing” the Indigenous children in order to assimilate them into white society. Therefore, they used any means necessary to fulfil this goal of erasing the children’s entire identity, to “kill the Indian in the child” in order to create “white” citizens. The school officials’ mission was to do just this, and if it required violent action to make the children conform to white society and its beliefs then they would do so. Though I must acknowledge that there were some employees within the schools who treated the children with kindness, these people were rare and didn’t stay long as anyone who had a generous and loving heart could not stand being surrounded in the despair that was so prevalent in these institutions.

So the children were left with no adult to turn for love and support as they feared the school officials who treated them with harshness, outward dislike and violence due to their race. An example of this was shown in a report submitted to the government from Crowfoot school by Nurse Ramage stating, “She later returned to the dining room to examine one of the girls who was reported to be marked badly by the strap. Several marks were found on her right lower limb. Five girls were in chains.” This violent punishment was carried out because these girls had committed the “crime” of speaking their language to the younger children who had yet to learn much English. So in hopes of comforting the young, scared children, they had dared to speak their “savage tongue” and they had paid dearly for it. Survivors also recall the nuns trying to turn the students against one another by offering them rewards such as apples or other special foods for telling on each other for practicing their culture or speaking their language. In this way, the nuns used the children’s hunger and desire to be loved to convince them to participate

---

8 Johnston, 8.
11 Milloy, 139.
12 Johnston, 101.
13 Grant Charles and Mike DeGagne, “Student-to-Student Abuse in the Indian Residential Schools in Canada: Setting the Stage for Further Understanding,” *Child and Youth Services* 34, no. 4 (2013): 348
in lateral violence and thus become tools in the assimilation process. Now students became wary of each other as even confiding in their peers was a potential danger and might result in bodily harm. When asked about the education she received in residential school, Marlene Starr answered that “I learned that being Indian is to be inferior.” This quote I feel highlights the highly racialized aspect behind such an education, as Indigenous students were not treated as equal to white children and the system was designed to keep it that way. One student remembers that whenever she made a mistake in her schoolwork the teacher would laugh at her and tell her that she couldn’t have expected much higher level work from just another “dirty Indian.” They were constantly discriminated against due to their race and made to feel shame for their identity, culture and family and punished for even “acting Indian.” It was due to this trauma that many of the students left the schools believing that they themselves were inferior and by participating in any of their cultural practices they would only lower themselves further in society.

The education the students received was far below the standards, as civilizing rather than educating was the main mission of the residential schools so there was much more focus on labour and religious teachings than learning in a classroom. As Blanche Hill-Easton, a survivor of the Mohawk Institute stated, “There was no education there, we were treated as slaves. We worked a lot more hours than we went to school.” Female students spent much of their time cooking, cleaning and praying instead of receiving an education as it was believed that they were destined for lower level employment such as domestic work and did not require the same amount of classroom learning that white students did. This civilizing mission shows the racial hierarchy set up in education at this time, as the government never wanted Indigenous peoples to become equal citizens alongside the white people, instead they were to be used as labourers while the preferred white citizens took the higher level employment. This racist ideal that Indigenous peoples were inherently lesser is highlighted by the Minister of the Interior and Superintendent of Indian Affairs Clifford Sifton when he stated in 1905, “you cannot press the Indian children as you can children of the white people, you cannot require so much of them.” By not expecting as much of Indigenous students, the teachers did not bother to educate the children and put much more emphasis on labour. For example, Ida Wasacase did not learn how to read until she was in grade three, yet her religious teachings and daily chores began the moment she stepped inside the school, showing the priorities the school officials gave towards certain aspects of education. Male students were given more freedom as they were allowed to work outside the school building in the fields or barns caring for animals, where much of this work would be unsupervised. Whereas the female students were forced to work within the building doing domestic work where they were always closely watched by the nuns. This left the female students with no opportunity to speak their language or discuss their culture with the other students, whereas the boys were able to do this in the brief moments they were outside on their own. Being under constant

---

15 Bev Sellars, They Called Me Number One (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2013), 51.
16 Sellars, 50.
17 Grant, No End of Grief, 194.
18 Longboat, 28.
20 Grant, Finding My Talk, 28.
22 Longboat, 31.
supervision also led to many incidents of punishment, as whenever a girl made a mistake she was physically abused.\textsuperscript{23} Many survivors spoke about breaking a dish or forgetting to clean something and being strapped multiple times for this small slip-up, one woman even received electric shock treatment.\textsuperscript{24} Female students suffered what is deemed as double-sided abuse, as they were not only punished for being Indigenous, but also for being women.

Much of the abuse the female students suffered from was attributed to the fact that they were female and because these schools were also religious institutions, women were to be pure, modest beings. The priests, nurses and nuns kept close track of the girls’ menstruation cycles and would question them about their periods each month to make sure they were not pregnant as Indigenous women were seen as being slaves to their passions and sexually polluted.\textsuperscript{25} They were often shamed for menstruating and if they happened to bleed in their underwear or beds they were beaten and mocked. One former students remembers an incident where a friend of hers was forced to place her bloody underwear on her own head while the nuns teased her and encouraged the other students to do the same.\textsuperscript{26} This mistreatment is inexcusable in any situation, but what makes this abuse even more confusing is often the nuns or school supervisors wouldn’t provide the girls with the sanitary napkins they needed while on their periods so bleeding in their clothing or beds was unavoidable.\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, punishing the girls for this was simply punishing them for being women. They also were told that they would be punished for participating in any sort of sexual activity, yet they were not taught what they were and how to react to such a situation. As the result the young girls who were sexually abused often felt huge amount of fear for the action, as they thought they were now sinners for engaging in such an act.\textsuperscript{28} When the girls spoke up to school officials about such sexual abuse occurring, their claims were denied and instead they were punished for even daring to say anything. As the result, students fell silent about the abuse and therefore, it kept occurring.\textsuperscript{29} “They were filled with shame and guilt because they blamed themselves for what happened”\textsuperscript{30} as the nuns made them feel as if they were somehow the monster. One survivor speaks about how the nurses “didn’t really care if you were hurt or sick, they were more interested in you behaving like a lady.”\textsuperscript{31} This represents the religious ideals of womanhood and femininity forced onto the young girls within the schools, and how virginity and modesty were highly valued whereas the general wellbeing of the children was not.

There are even accounts of virginity testing that occurred within the schools as these institutions were extremely religious and a woman’s value to man was to be determined on her virginity. The test was conducted by a school official and they would stick a small instrument up young girls’ vaginas to check if the hymen was still intact. If it wasn’t there they were beaten and

\textsuperscript{23} Grant, Finding My Talk, 25.
\textsuperscript{24} Longboat, 29.
\textsuperscript{25} Haig-Brown, “Always Remembering: Indian Residential Schools in Canada,” 228.
\textsuperscript{26} Haig-Brown, “Always Remembering: Indian Residential Schools in Canada,” 229.
\textsuperscript{27} Grant, No End of Grief, 231.
\textsuperscript{28} Celia Haig-Brown, Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School (Vancouver: Arsenal Pump Press, 1998), 63.
\textsuperscript{30} Grant, No End of Grief, 229.
\textsuperscript{31} Longboat, 28.
shamed by the entire school population for their impurity. The fact that these young girls were likely raped by someone within the school was not acknowledged when the beating was occurring, instead the girl’s action was attributed to her inferior race as she was seen as another “loose, dirty squaw” who couldn’t resist temptation. One male survivor even told about how “Boys would bribe a supervisor with whiskey to unlock the door to the girls’ dormitory at Port Alberni. Then the boys would stampede into the girls’ dormitory.” This in itself suggests that this would be a surprise intrusion and that not all of these girls would have been willing to perform sexual activities with the boys. Yet it was the girls who were tested for virginity and punished for not staying pure while the offenders received no such penalty. The fact that lateral violence was so prevalent among children brings up the concern as to who exposed these children to abusive acts in the first place. It is likely that the children who abused other students, were actually abused by school authorities themselves, and with this normalization of abuse there began a cycle of repetitive compulsion.

As stated by the Assembly of First Nations, “the survivors of the Indian residential school system have, in many cases, continued to have their lives shaped by the experiences in these schools.” This abuse from males and the enforced belief that all sexual relations were a sin led many of the female students to fear such intimacy and have unstable relationships with men in their adulthood. One former student stated that she knew very little about marriage and love when she graduated from the residential school and it led her into a very dysfunctional relationship along with three children by the time she was nineteen. She attributes this to the fact she was naïve, and craving love and acceptance so she gave her heart to the first man who showed her some kindness. Other women ended up in abusive relationships as the result of sexual abuse in the schools. Bev Sellars mother was one of these women, as she no longer valued herself or her body due to years of abuse and therefore, she let other men mistreat her like they had in the schools. Sheila Wolfleg internalized the pain over the sexual abuse she experienced in residential school, which led her into multiple abusive relationships and to use heroin to numb her pain. She even attempted suicide in hopes of escaping the trauma of residential school. This enforced colonialist belief that Indigenous women are automatically inferior in male dominated society helps to explain why the cycle of abuse began and still continues in many Indigenous communities as in 2009 a government survey reported that 279/1000 Indigenous women claimed to have experienced domestic abuse compared to 102/1000 non-Indigenous Canadians. Another woman was so influenced by the schools idea of sin, that she feared her own baby as she believed that by having a child she was following a path to hell. Others such as Bette were never able to begin a relationship with a man due to the sexual abuse she suffered in the school, as she had fear

33 Haig-Brown, Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School, 110.
34 Grant, No End of Grief, 229.
36 Milloy, 299
37 Longboat, 30.
38 Sellars, 11.
41 Grant, No End of Grief, 232.
of being touched and would shy away from anyone who even offered her a hug.\textsuperscript{42} These examples all show that the residential schools caused the female students to not understand the true intimacy and love behind sexual contact as they had only experienced it as a form of violence against them and were taught that it was a sin rather than a form of love.

The physical abuse and violent treatment the female students experienced within the schools also continued to haunt many of the survivors throughout their lives and often affected how they lived their lives. A former student sums up this argument when she declared, “the punishment has continued all our lives as we try to piece together who we are and what the world means to us”\textsuperscript{43} One survivor named Bev Albrecht wrote about how the strict cleaning schedule of the residential school had programmed her to incessantly clean her own home as an adult. This is because she feared that she would be beaten if she let it become dirty like she had been when she was in school. “I have to stop myself from getting up at night to clean, I have been doing it for so long now, and I don’t know how to stop.”\textsuperscript{44} Another survivor went deaf due to the nuns pouring alcohol down her ear as a “treatment” for her ear ache. She said all she felt was a sharp pain and then she lost all hearing in that ear from that time forward.\textsuperscript{45} Others such as Bev and Sherlene turned to alcohol and other substances to help to dull the pain and forget the many times they were beaten while in the schools. Bev even tried to commit suicide at the age of seventeen as she felt she could no longer cope with the pain that filled her life and she believed she was worthless and no one would miss her.\textsuperscript{46} Both Bev and Sherlene have become sober, and gone on to become activists in their Indigenous communities, Bev by becoming chief and an author\textsuperscript{47} and Sherlene by participating in revival projects and language courses.\textsuperscript{48} As Blanche stated, “I am a firm believer that when you experience hard times- it can either strengthen or break you”\textsuperscript{49} and though some have found peace within themselves, others are still on the long journey of healing the wounds colonialism created.

When The Truth and Reconciliation Committee began collecting data from residential school survivors, over 80% of the children reported to have experienced abuse while attending schools from either their peers or school officials, whether it be physical, mental, sexual or spiritual.\textsuperscript{50} It is unknown how many more survivors were abused in the first two phases of residential schools, as they had passed away by the time the government began to acknowledge how horrifically racist and destructive the school system was. At the time of Stephen Harper’s official apology for the residential school system, approximately 80 000 survivors were alive, which means 70 000 survivors did not get to experience the privilege of hearing it and knowing that the trauma they endured while attending the schools was finally being acknowledged and regretted.\textsuperscript{51} However, focussing specifically on the female students, 85% of the abused former students reported to have been sexually or physically abused mainly by school officials, but some

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{42} Longboat, 34.
\textsuperscript{43} Haig-Brown, “Always Remembering: Indian Residential Schools in Canada,” 228.
\textsuperscript{44} Longboat, 30.
\textsuperscript{45} Longboat, 31.
\textsuperscript{46} Sellars, xiv.
\textsuperscript{47} Sellars, 164.
\textsuperscript{48} Longboat, 33.
\textsuperscript{49} Longboat, 28.
\end{flushleft}
were also abused by fellow students.\textsuperscript{52} As of 2002, 8500 residential school survivors had filed lawsuits against the government for the abuses they suffered in the schools which led the government to apologize in 2008 and give out over one billion dollars to the residential survivors who are alive today, this package is known as the “common experience payment.” However, money doesn’t heal the wounds, as Thrasher stated, “They think paying us is going to heal us. No. You can’t buy pain.”\textsuperscript{53}

As the result of lack of government support, many Indigenous communities have begun taking healing initiatives on themselves. They see self-determination and self-government as the way to rid themselves of the federal government’s control and the lingering colonialism that has long haunted their past.\textsuperscript{54} In present times Indigenous communities, both on and off reserves, are working together to create better lives for future generations and break the cycle of poverty and abuse by the seventh generation through reviving their cultural practices and languages. As Jan Longboat stated, “When we gather knowledge and have a good mind, we become self-reliant and self-sustaining, self-governing nations once again.”\textsuperscript{55} There have been many healing centres set up across the country by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation to promote Indigenous peoples healing from within, with the support of others who understand their situation and elders who provide them with the guidance they need to follow a better path in life.\textsuperscript{56} This type of healing does not begin with monetary compensation, instead it addresses the issue and works towards group-oriented mending of the wounds as “healing occurs in stages.”\textsuperscript{57} The AHF Final Report found that Indigenous healing approaches such as talking circles, speaking with elders and attending ceremonies were much more preferred than Western therapies\textsuperscript{58} and programs such as Jan Longboat’s Idawadadi Project focus specifically on Indigenous women in Ontario and work to reverse the effects of the residential school system. They do this by creating opportunities for women to learn their language, knowledge and traditional teachings in an environment where they are respected and supported. Jan Longboat’s program continued for over ten years and more than 8000 women participated in this cultural revival and healing journey.\textsuperscript{59} There have also been schools created to promote Indigenous pride within the children and create a strong foundation of identity such as Akwesasne Mohawk Freedom School which is run by the members of Akwesasne First Nation. In this way, Indigenous communities are using education as a tool for revival and reversing the effects of colonialism, rather than as a tool for assimilation as it has been used in the past.

As Spanish residential school survivor, Shirley Williams stated that we should not underestimate “the healing power of learning”\textsuperscript{60} as it is through learning about our languages, cultural practices and traditions that we will be able to create a strong foundation of identity.

\textsuperscript{52} Milloy, 298.
\textsuperscript{54} The Native Women’s Association of Canada, “From Residential Schools to Prison,” Gender Matters: Building Strength and Reconciliation, (March 2012), 5.
\textsuperscript{55} Longboat, 41.
\textsuperscript{56} Longboat, 99.
\textsuperscript{57} Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 10.
\textsuperscript{58} Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 15.
\textsuperscript{59} Longboat, 3.
\textsuperscript{60} Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 6.
Community-oriented healing practices can serve to reawaken a sense of self while at the same rebuilding relationship with one another and the connection to your language, land culture and traditions. In many cases it is Indigenous women who have managed to hold onto these cultural practices and our languages despite colonialism trying to erase all that makes us Indigenous. Therefore, by women reclaiming their roles as educators and nurturers within their communities, they will lead our people on our healing journey and become respected, empowered members of society once more. As Bev Sellars stated, “the power of the native spirit still exists in spite of residential schools, not as a result of them.”

Despite enduring hundreds of years of racist discrimination, genocide and forced assimilation, Indigenous peoples in Canada have proved that they are strong, resilient peoples. You can try to crush our spirits and destroy our identities but we will continue to survive. It takes time to heal these wounds that white men inflicted on us but with each generation we will gain strength and renew our sense of pride. “The name of the North American Indian will not be forgotten as long as the rivers flow and the hills and the mountains shall stand, we have progressed but we have not vanished.”

References


Charles, Grant and Mike DeGagne. “Student-to-Student Abuse in the Indian Residential Schools in Canada: Setting the Stage for Further Understanding.” *Child and Youth Services* 34, no. 4 (2013): 343-359.


---


Sellars, Bev. They Called Me Number One. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2013.


