
Myth versus Evidence: Your Choice

By Mark DeWolf

There is nothing simple about the story of Canada's Indian Residential Schools. For one thing, what we think of as the Indian residential schools underwent considerable change during their 126-year history, with fluctuations in size, focus, and influence. Beginning as a collection of industrial schools and later transformed to the residential school model, the system had its origin in one solitary school established in 1833 as part of the St. John's Mission in Sault Ste. Marie,¹ became a system of industrial schools and, later, residential schools under the newly-formed Government of Canada, grew to a maximum of 86 schools in 1960, then shrank again until the last one closed in 1996.²

At different times, the system operated under quite different mandates, policies and funding practices. Different religious organizations from a number of Christian denominations provided staffing and funding, and the schools served many different native communities in quite different ways. Individual schools saw very different teachers, counsellors, and administrators come and go, and Canadian attitudes regarding Indigenous people evolved. Over time, some schools came to resemble less the Dickensian workhouse and more the regular boarding school of the sort the *Globe and Mail* helps to promote in its annual special features.

But for reasons any observer of today's media can easily comprehend, the general public knows little of this complexity. Long complicated stories, filled with details that confuse more than they inform, do not easily attract readers, viewers, or listeners. What finds its way into the public consciousness is an encapsulated version, often focusing on the more sensational aspects: helpless young people tormented physically and sexually, the sometimes brutal repression of vital native culture, and the misery of children torn from the arms of their parents by Indian agents or RCMP constables.

Thanks to the media, reports of secretive burials of children who died while in a residential school have sparked public outrage. While books intended for young readers, books that repeat the negative narrative and sometimes include false information, are finding their way into Canadian schools, the frequent repetition of such sensational stories in respected media builds a belief in the minds of many Canadians that they are plain and simple fact.

Simple, yes. Fact, not so much.

Cultural repression, abuse of all kinds, forcible incarceration, and even preventable deaths did happen, and a system that should have done far more to prevent such things can rightly be condemned. But the facts show that they happened much less frequently than is commonly believed, and arguably had much less effect on First Nations communities than has been confidently stated. The "accepted fact" routinely included in widely-disseminated media reports is in truth a convenient myth.

Even responsible journalists have come to accept and repeat it without question. A recent two-page spread in

¹ http://www.nrss.ca/Resource_Centre/MohawkIRS/MohawkIRS_26November2009_wm.pdf

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Indian_residential_school_system

the *Globe and Mail* was a timely examination of the gap in educational attainment that exists between Canada's First Nations people and the non-Indigenous population. Focusing on disappointing graduation rates among First Nations high school students, its author made clear that this is a serious public policy issue. But, all too predictably, the article pointed to the residential school system as a cause of the current situation.

Worse still, the reference preceded a mention of endemic poverty among First Nations people, giving the impression that the schools were a more important factor than the poverty — and quite possibly its cause.³ If this were the only instance of such an off-hand placing of blame for a serious problem on the residential schools, it could perhaps pass unremarked. But sadly, nearly all media reports focusing on the challenges facing First Nations people routinely point to the residential schools as a major cause. Almost without fail, the IRS system and its intergenerational effects are blamed not only for the education deficit but also for the poverty, drug and alcohol addictions, high unemployment, and disproportionate rates of suicide.

Like most mythical narratives, this one contains a kernel of fact, and like all myths, it serves to satisfy some compelling need or desire on the part of those who cling to it. First Nations leaders refer to it in the belief that it generates feelings of guilt and sympathy in the Canadian public, assisting native efforts to bring about badly-needed changes. The federal government makes no denial — and even apologizes — because the schools conveniently existed at far remove from their current administration, and provide a handy explanation for ills that still beset our First Nations people. Blaming the IRS system deflects attention from far more damaging and continuing government policy, action, and inaction.

The Canadian public, equally eager to shift the blame for current ills onto something so safely in the past, is prone to accept the oft-repeated claims about the horrors of the IRS and its lingering legacy. Tales of lonely, frightened, beaten, and molested children exert a certain morbid attraction, appealing to the same visceral impulse that accounts in part for the popularity of Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called 'It'*. That some of the abusers were priests and nuns adds to our horrified fascination. *Time's* political columnist, Joe Klein, writing about the current state of American politics, refers to a "generational tendency toward public melodrama",⁴ and the public's interest in abuse stories to which the media pander provides an excellent example.

But surely there are Canadians who think public policy should be based on firm evidence rather than emotional, widely-promulgated but demonstrably inaccurate stories. They might want to take a second — and unbiased — look at the subject.

A close examination of recorded fact, along with a bias-free examination of those studies that have attempted to measure the long-term effects of the residential experience on former students, turns up telling evidence that the IRS system is far from the greatest villain in this story. Far more significant factors have created — and perpetuate — the many problems faced by First Nations people today, and those include the underfunding of native education generally, the government's repeated failure to observe treaty obligations, and a variety of other misguided federal policies. These last include the failure to consult meaningfully with native groups regarding issues that affect them significantly, the 67-year ban on such important gatherings as the Sun Dance and the potlatch, and the rush to place native children in provincial schools in the 1950s.

And the finger-pointing should not just be directed at Ottawa. The rapid spread of non-Indigenous culture through technology has likely done more to erode First Nations culture and community life than any efforts by Christian missionaries.

In this panoply of possible causes, how significant was the residential school system?

As government records clearly show, the great majority of First Nations children were never enrolled in a

³ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/widening-education-gap-leaves-aboriginal-canadians-further-behind/article14738527/>

⁴ <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2154390,00.html>

residential school. Indeed, between 1870 and 1996, a surprisingly large percentage of native people received no formal education at all. In 1921,⁵ when the revised Indian Act solidified the compulsory attendance of Indigenous children in some kind of school, about 11 percent of First Nations people were enrolled in either a residential school or a federal day school.⁶ By 1939, that figure had risen to approximately 15 percent of the First Nations population, but the total enrolment of 18,752 still represented only 70 percent of the 26,200 First Nations children aged 7 to 16.⁷ Not until the late 1950s were nearly all native children — about 23 percent of the First Nations population — enrolled in either a residential school (in 1959, about 9,000), a federal day school (about 18,000) or a provincial public school (about 8,000).⁸

One cause of low overall enrolments in the early years was a shortage of schools. In 1939, failure to attend school had had legal consequences for at least 18 years, yet the 373 schools provided — 79 residential schools, 283 day schools, 11 combined “white and Indian day schools”⁹— had to serve 571 different Bands scattered over 2,226 Reserves, some of them in remote isolated areas. When children did have a day school in their area, overcrowding was often a serious problem.

Annual reports from the government department overseeing native education frequently mentioned the need to improve the qualifications and training of the teachers who staffed the Indian schools. Because of the relatively low salaries and difficult working conditions, better qualified teachers frequently moved on after a year or two to better-paying positions in public or “white” private schools. The quality of classroom teaching suffered from this frequent turnover.

During the 1930s and early '40s, the Great Depression and the demands of wartime caused a drop in the amount of money directed to native education. The \$168 of expenditure per enrolled pupil in 1930 dropped to \$98 in 1937, and didn't rise to former levels until 1947. Appropriations for the residential schools in 1933 were less than half what they had been in 1930.¹⁰ But it was at this time of financial cutbacks that residential school enrolments finally rose to equal or exceed those of the day schools.

Basic enrolment figures however tell only part of the story. While some students lived in a residential school for as many as 12 years, others were enrolled for far shorter periods, some for only one or two years. An examination of years of enrolment for those who received a Common Experience Payment under the terms of the 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) reveals that the average enrolment period was about 4.5 years, a figure that contrasts sharply with the commonly-held belief that every IRS student lost his or her entire childhood due to residential school enrolment. The oft-repeated figure of 150,000 Indigenous children enrolled in a residential schools — simply an estimate by the federal government — includes any child who was enrolled for even one month, and thus helps to paint an inaccurate picture of the schools' impact on Indigenous life.

And enrolment figures mask the fact that high rates of absenteeism were regularly reported. For most of the years in which the IRS operated, between 10 and 15 percent of residential students were absent on any given day.¹¹

Day school attendance was far worse. In the 253 day schools operating in 1921, only 50 percent of native students were showing up, and until the 1950s, these poorly-funded, inadequately-staffed schools consistently had absentee rates in the 20 percent and 30 percent range. In the 1936-37 academic year, to choose just one

⁵ The Indian Affairs Report for 1921 has no hesitancy in stating that “the Government decided to adopt a parental policy toward the native, to educate and protect him, and give him a chance to develop and prosper.”

⁶ “The total enrolment for the year was 12,558 pupils, 6,219 boys and 6,339 girls. As compared with the preceding year, this shows an increased enrolment of 362 pupils. There was an enrolment of 7,775 in the day schools, 3,156 in the boarding schools and 1,627 in the industrial schools.” Annual Report, Department of Indian Affairs, March, 1921.

⁷ Annual Report of the Indian Affairs Branch, Department of Mines and Resources, March, 1939

⁸ Annual Report of the Indian Affairs Branch, Department of Citizenship and Immigration, 1960

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Annual Reports of the Indian Affairs Branch

¹¹ Ibid.

example, attendance in Indian day schools sank as low as 63 percent.¹² The only residential school in Atlantic Canada, at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, was established in part because two previously-established day schools had been forced to close due to poor attendance. Some of the reasons for this absenteeism — the movement of families to areas where seasonal work beckoned, the need to help out at home during the Depression, and the opportunity to take labouring jobs left vacant by servicemen — are understandable, and it is worth noting the the TRC Report acknowledges that very few parents were ever charged or convicted for keeping their children out of school. But children who aren't in school aren't getting an education.

Even when family allowance payments in the 1950s led to a Canada-wide increase in public school attendance, the federal day schools reported higher rates of absenteeism than provincial public schools. In 1958, for example, school attendance rates across Canada averaged 91 percent,¹³ while attendance rates in federal day schools for Ontario's First Nations children stood at 86 percent, and those in Manitoba hovered around 80 percent.¹⁴ During that decade and those that followed, many First Nations students who suddenly found themselves in the alien world of the "white" public schools quickly dropped out.

And things have not improved considerably. A 2012 *Edmonton Journal* article reported that "In total this school year, 17,954 children and young adults age four through 21 living on reserves in Alberta are either in school or have earned their high school diploma. Another 11,699, or 39 per cent of children and young adults, have dropped out or were never registered."¹⁵

Little or no education at all must certainly be considered a major cause of poverty, its related social ills, and all kinds of negative intergenerational effects, but this glaring fact rarely gets a mention in articles dealing with First Nations poverty, unemployment, and related social problems. Surprisingly, the connection between the lack of what most Canadians would perceive as necessary education in the history of many native families and the current state of Indigenous communities today is not acknowledged in the TRC Report.

As for the negative intergenerational effects of residential school attendance, contrary evidence has come to light. A 2010 Statistics Canada study that examined native language use by First Nations children living off-reserve removed residential school attendance as one of the covariates in its analysis "because their presence or absence did not change the results from the final full model."¹⁶ In other words, those who had attended a residential school were no different in their use of their native language than those who had not.

The 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey shows that older First Nations people — a segment of the population who are more likely than younger people to have attended a residential school — have more use of their native languages than their children or grandchildren.¹⁷ The precipitous drop recorded in native language use coincides with the period in which residential schooling was being phased out, and enrolment in provincial public schools phased in. Some researchers now suggest that, although the use of native languages was strongly, even harshly, discouraged in many of the residential schools, the closed environment of the schools (dorms, play rooms, and playgrounds, for example) actually allowed more native language use among students, and that, plus the students' resistance to the forbidding of their language, ironically helped them to retain many of those languages.

Moreover, at least one credible survey reports that former students of residential schools are nearly twice as likely to have retained more of their language and traditional culture than those who did not attend an IRS institution, and are more likely to provide leadership in preserving that culture, than those who did not attend.¹⁸

¹² Annual Report of the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources, 1938

¹³https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-516-x/sectionw/W67_93a-eng.csv

¹⁴ Annual Report of the Indian Affairs Branch, Department of Citizenship and Immigration, 1958

¹⁵ "Why aren't First Nations kids in school?", *Edmonton Journal*, June, 2012

¹⁶ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-008-x/2010002/article/11336-eng.htm>

¹⁷ Family, community, and Aboriginal language among young First Nations children living off reserve in Canada, Statistics Canada, September 9, 2010

¹⁸ First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey: Results for Adults, Youths and Children Living in First Nations

The First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey of 2002/03 reported that, among First Nations children living on a Reserve, “With regard to youth liking or attending school, no differences were apparent when considering whether or not their parents had attended residential school.” While the Survey’s data suggested that a parent’s residential school experience had some effect on whether or not a child failed a grade — 47 percent likelihood as opposed to 40 percent likelihood for students whose parents didn’t attend — it also revealed that “attendance of one or more grandparents at a residential school was unrelated to a child’s school attendance, learning problems at school, feelings about school, or having to repeat a grade. Thus,” said the report’s authors, “one may argue that there may be a generational decrease in the impact of attending residential schools.”¹⁹

Little or none of this emerging evidence appears in the media upon which Canadians depend for information and informed comment. What few efforts are made to place the IRS system’s significance in its proper context provoke outrage and attract fierce condemnation by those who suspect a racist or political motivation. As a result, discussion of the subject is virtually nil, and educational materials containing the erroneous claims are going out to Canadian schoolchildren.

Even the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has helped spread erroneous information. At the final National Gathering in Edmonton, one of the Commission’s information displays stated that, after 1920, criminal prosecution threatened First Nations parents who failed to enrol their children in a residential school. This falsehood, one frequently repeated by supposedly reputable journalists, is a reference to a clause in the revised Indian Act that said children had to be enrolled in *some* kind of school, a clause that was little different from the Ontario government’s 1891 legislation — nearly 30 years earlier — that made school attendance compulsory for that province’s children up to the age of 14, with legal penalties for failure to comply. Other provinces had similar laws.

And the “criminal prosecution”? The penalty specified by the Indian Act for the “crime” of not sending a child to school was “a fine of not more than two dollars and costs, or imprisonment for a period not exceeding ten days or both.” And as with provincial laws regarding school attendance, there would be no penalty if the child was “unable to attend school by reason of sickness or other unavoidable cause... or has been excused in writing by the Indian agent or teacher for temporary absence to assist in husbandry or urgent and necessary household duties.”²⁰

Let us be clear. The IRS system was a deeply flawed attempt to accomplish two main objectives: to give native children education and training that would help them survive economically and socially in a white man’s world, and to eradicate those aspects of native culture that would hold them back from achieving those goals. As is now perfectly obvious, it failed to do either. Moreover, the system was funded and administered in such a way as to allow an unconscionable amount of neglect and abuse of vulnerable young people.

But recognizing the system as a bad one should not have us wildly exaggerating its failures, demonizing it, and allowing it to distract us from far more serious threats to First Nations individuals and communities. As long as the myth of the Indian Residential School continues to be used as a scapegoat for 200 years of land appropriation, cultural invasion, deprivation, marginalization, and demoralization, little will be done to reverse policies and practices that continue today. This myth should be put on the shelf alongside other firmly-held beliefs that historical research has exploded. Public policy should be based on evidence, not popular perception, and our attention should now shift to the real causes of the problems faced by a people who did nothing to deserve the hardships and indignities that have been continually heaped upon them.

Communities, First Nations Centre, 2005

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Chapter 50, An Act to Amend the Indian Act, Government of Canada, 1919-1920

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