

What is Missing from the Missing Children's Story at Indian Residential Schools?

By Rodney A. Clifton

Canadians were horrified when they heard that 215 unmarked graves of murdered and missing Indigenous students had been discovered on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School (IRS) in the Spring of 2021.¹ Since that announcement, hundreds, if not thousands, of news reports have been published about murdered Indigenous children and mass, unmarked graves discovered in the yards of many Canadian residential schools.² The *New York Times*, for example, titled its first article “‘Horrible History’: Mass Graves of Indigenous Children Reported in Canada.”³

Many people around the world believed these reports, implying that residential school employees, many of whom were Christians, and a substantial number were Indigenous, had engaged in the genocide of Indigenous children. As a result of these reports, over 80 churches, across the country, were vandalized or set on fire.⁴ Many of the desecrated churches belonged to denominations that did not manage any residential schools.

This was *not* the first time that children were said to have been murdered in Canada's Indian Residential Schools. A horrific claim was made by Doris Young on June 22, 2012, during a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) public hearings. Ms. Young had been a student at the Elkhorn Anglican Residential School in Manitoba, and the commission reported that she recalled seeing “*a child being killed...*” [Emphasis added]

In the TRC Report, Doris Young is quoted as saying:

*I remember was, there was all these screams, and there was blood over the, the walls. [Crying]... and we were told that if we, if we ever told, or tried to run away, we would, the same thing would happen to us. [Crying] So, it was a dangerous time for, for children, and for me at that, those days. [Crying] We never really knew who would be next to be murdered because we witnessed one already. [Crying]*⁵

Because the commission had been charged with ferreting out and publishing the truth about the IRS system, and two of the commissioners were lawyers, many Canadians probably thought that Doris Young's testimony was *true*. But Ms. Young's testimony was never verified in either the TRC Report or in public statements by the commissioners. Why did the TRC, governmental authorities, church leaders, and many news reporters *not* ask a few pertinent questions that would have helped clarify this horrific claim? There are at least seven questions that should have been asked.

¹ Courtney Dickson and Bridgette Watson, “Children found buried at former B.C. residential school, First Nation says,” *CBC News*, May 27, 2021.

² See, for example, Danielle Paradis, “Setting the Story Straight,” *Canadian Geographic*, January 6, 2023.

³ Ian Austen, “‘Horrible History’: Mass Grave of Indigenous Children Reported in Canada,” *New York Times*, May 28, 2021.

⁴ See Cosmin Dzsurdza, “A map of the 83 churches that have been vandalized or burned since the residential school announcement,” *True North*, July 4, 2023.

⁵ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada's Residential Schools: The Legacy, Vol. 5*, (Montreal, PQ: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 189.

Questions that were Overlooked

First, why did the commission *not* refer Doris Young's claim to the RCMP, or another highly competent and independent investigative agency, for a thorough investigation? Surely, the commissioners, Canadians, and members of the Anglican Church expected that school employees who allegedly murdered a child would be charged, and if found guilty, they would be punished. But if they were innocent, the TRC Report should *not* imply that they were involved in murdering a child. Doris Young later claimed that: "The RCMP investigated, [and] they said they couldn't find anything. They came back and told me that they found no evidence of what I was talking about...."⁶ This clarification makes it even more difficult to understand why the commissioners included her statement in the TRC Report.

Second, it is equally surprising that the Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners did not include any recommendations in its 94 Calls to Action to search residential school yards for murdered and buried children. Only two Calls (73 & 74) recommended searching cemeteries close to residential schools for the remains of buried children and notifying their living relatives if any were found.⁷

Two facts need to be considered before addressing the next question. There are cemeteries in the school yards of some — perhaps the majority — of residential schools because there were often mission churches with cemeteries close to residential schools with chapels that also served as parish churches. These were not school cemeteries, as The TRC Report⁸ and some news items claim, but parish cemeteries often with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, including children, buried there. As well, Indigenous people often marked graves with wooden crosses, and over time, these crosses disintegrate leaving graves unmarked and often forgotten. On the Siksika and Kainai First Nations, for example, local people say that over 70 percent of the graves are unmarked.

Third, in many, if not all, residential schools, Indigenous people were school employees. It is inconceivable that Indigenous employees would take part in, or listen to accounts of, the murder of children without reporting this information to authorities, especially when some of the children would likely be relatives or the children of friends. Surprisingly, nothing is said in the TRC Report about Indigenous (or non-Indigenous) residential school employees reporting the murder of any children to either authorities or the commission.

Fourth, many independent professionals, including dentists, medical doctors, optometrists, public health nurses, and school inspectors regularly visited residential schools. Indian Affairs paid for their professional services, and surely, these professionals would have informed Indian Affairs, the chiefs and band councilors, or the police, if children were missing from school.

Fifth, in residential schools on large reserves in Southern Canada, the Siksika and Kainai First Nations, for example, where most of the children lived relatively close to the schools, many of the children went home on weekends and during school holidays. If children were missing, there is little doubt that their parents would have reported that their children were missing to the responsible authorities. Also, chiefs, band councilors, and parents regularly attended gatherings and church services at the schools, so they too would, undoubtedly, have noticed that some children were missing, and they would have investigated and reported such a situation.

Sixth, why did the government officials, church leaders, journalists, and citizens, who read the TRC Report, not ask about the disposition of school records? Specifically, why didn't Indian Affairs employees notice that the records for some students were *not* being sent to them? One wonders if Indian Affairs continued to pay school fees and room and board for students who had stopped attending school? It is inconceivable that Indian Affairs did not enquire into what

⁶ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada's Residential Schools: The Legacy*, Vol. 5, (Montreal, PQ: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 189.

⁷ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Canada's Residential Schools: Reconciliation*, Vol. 6. (Montreal, PQ: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 237.

⁸ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Canada's Residential Schools: Reconciliation*, Vol. 6. (Montreal, PQ: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 237.

happened to children who were missing from residential schools.

Seventh, in later years, Indigenous parents received child allowances and treaty disbursements for their children. If these children had been murdered, would the parents still collect the allowance and disbursement cheques? If payments were sent to these families, wouldn't the Canadian Revenue Agency and Indian Affairs have asked for explanations and reimbursement?

Conclusion

The TRC spent six years and \$60 million studying Indian Residential Schools, and authoring a 3,500-page report, but it did not address these seven pertinent questions. Very few government officials, church leaders, or journalists raised these questions either.

Indeed, it is surprising that until the “revelations” about the Kamloops Roman Catholic Residential School — nine years after Doris Young reported that she saw a child being murdered in the Elkhorn Anglican School — newspaper and magazine articles began claiming, with little solid evidence, that hundreds, if not thousands, of Indigenous children had been murdered and buried in residential school yards.⁹

Even more surprising is that the highest Canadian officials, the Prime Minister, the Governor General, and members of the House of Commons, publicly claimed, or supported the claim, that missing and murdered Indigenous children were buried in residential school yards. The Prime Minister had the Canadian flag lowered on federal buildings for months in mourning for these children,¹⁰ and the federal government made over \$130 million available for exhuming the bodies of IRS children.¹¹

But up to the end of October 2023, no remains of Indigenous school children have been exhumed from any school yard that was *not* also a cemetery.¹² Readers will be pleased to learn that to date, there is no forensic evidence of a genocide of Indigenous children at Canadian Indian Residential Schools.

In support of this conclusion, on March 21, 2023, Kimberly Murray, the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves, informed The Standing Senate Committee on Indigenous Peoples that “The children aren't missing; they're buried in cemeteries. They're missing because the families were never told where they're buried.”¹³

Finally, a democracy cannot function without a commitment to truth by governments, commissions like the TRC, and the news media. Truth, and its verification, needs to be reestablished as a foundational value for our country. Without truth, Canadians will not be able to advance to an honest and fair reconciliation that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission aspires to achieve.

⁹ Why didn't “knowledge keepers” inform the commission that children had been murdered and buried in school yards during its public hearings?

¹⁰ See, for example, Justin Trudeau, “Trudeau Offers Apology, No Concrete Commitments During Visit to Tk'emlups te Secwepemc Nation,” *Global News*, October 18, 2021; Maclean's, “Governor General Mary Simon's 2021 Throne Speech: Full Transcript,” *Maclean's*, November 23, 2021; Kelly Geraldine Malone, “It was historic’: Motion to call residential schools genocide backed unanimously,” *Canadian Press*, October 28, 2022; Terry Glavin, “The year of the graves: How the world's media got it wrong on residential school graves,” *National Post*, May 26, 2022; Patrice Dutil, “Canada is not a half-mast nation,” *History Reclaimed*, November 11, 2021.

¹¹ See CBC News, “Ottawa Pledges \$320 Million to Search for Residential School Graves and Support Survivors,” *CBC News*, August 10, 2021.

¹² See, for example, Brian Giesbrecht, “Unmarked Graves Claim Reach Farce Levels,” *Western Standard*, February 5, 2023.

¹³ <https://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/Committee/441/APPA/33EV-56063-E>