


2017

Putting an End to the Silence: Educating Society about the Canadian Residential School System

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Recommended Citation

Kuhl, Jamie Lee. 2017. "Putting an End to the Silence: Educating Society about the Canadian Residential School System." *Bridges: An Undergraduate Journal of Contemporary Connections* 2, (1). http://scholars.wlu.ca/bridges_contemporary_connections/vol2/iss1/1

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Colonization of North America has brought about many harms for Indigenous peoples and their cultures. The government sponsored Indian residential school system is no different in this respect. Despite the enduring legacy present in contemporary society, and the residential schools significant, yet tragic, part of Canadian history, the account often remains untold (Nicol 2014, 24). In spite of societal ignorance, there appears to be great importance in all citizens being educated on this history (Nicol 2014, 28). Furthering this point, concern over the lack of knowledge regarding the schools being expressed by Indigenous peoples notes the importance of teaching about the residential school history (Gray 2011, 14). Consequently, the argument that it is necessary all Canadian's be taught the history of the Indian residential schools will be raised through the course of this report. Using evidence indicating knowledge of the residential school system can serve as a means to foster healing, a means to contextualize current events and a means to prevent future harm, a conclusion demonstrating the necessity of teaching society will be founded.

Residential schools first emerged in Canada during the 1830s with the last one closing in the mid-1990s (DeGagne 2007, 49). At that time of their enactment, settlers believed the Aboriginal peoples were savages who needed help in order to save their people from extinction (Iwama 2000, 241). This led to the government and Christian churches forcing Indigenous children to go to the schools in order to 'civilize' the population in hopes of saving them from an otherwise inevitable extinction (Sharpe 2011, 3). Since the closure of the residential schools it has been established that over 150,000 children were taken and enrolled in the schools in order to accomplish this goal of assimilation (Belanger 2010, 113). From this number, an estimated 80,000 direct survivors of the schools are still remaining in Canada today (Belanger 2010, 111).

From the experiences of the victims, the true nature of the schools and their administrators have been revealed. Numerous survivors have begun to disclose their personal experiences of neglect and abuse to the public (DeGagne 2007, 50). There is an additional estimated 20 to 75 percent of students who died after being admitted to the schools which exemplifies the neglect and abuse that was present (Loyie, Spear, and Brissenden 2014, 60). Contributing from the victimization, Belanger (2010) notes that residential school attendees as well as their families are placed at higher risk of encountering social problems and psychological destructive tendencies (305). Furthermore, Belanger (2010) describes the prominent role that residential schools have played in the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples within the Canadian correctional system, where this demographic accounts for 80 percent of admissions to provincial custody while only representing 10 percent of the population (224). Overall, it can be observed that the schools were highly

damaging to the survivors and their descendants. Yet in light of this information, most of Canadian society remains unaware or misinformed of this important historical event. This, as well as outcry from Indigenous peoples for more education on the matter constitutes an appropriate rationale for pursuing this report topic further (Gray 2011, 14).

Through educating society on the history of the residential school system, healing for survivors, their families and their communities can be achieved. By teaching citizens this history, important steps required to foster healing can occur. Firstly, this would lead to the truth behind the horrendous school conditions and treatment of the Indigenous youths who attended, being completely exposed. No longer would only a small segment of society receive this information. From this, an acknowledgement of harm created by the schools can be formed, in which survivors will achieve validation of their claims (Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman 2014, 333). By educating society about the residential school experiences, responsibility could be assigned to the guilty parties.

These developments are important and can result in healing for Aboriginal communities. According to Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman (2014), knowledge and awareness of the residential school system history can have a therapeutic effect which promotes healing (333). Without educating society on this history, victims will continue to suppress their memories as well as internalize shame, thus preventing them from healing and urging them toward destructive coping (DeGagne 2007, 51; Gray 2011, 11). Additionally, disclosure of the harms associated with the schools and the ownership assigned to them acts as a matter of catharsis for victims by delivering justice, which ultimately produces another means of healing (Flisfeder 2010, 14; Sharpe 2011, 6). Furthermore, Gray (2011) notes an alternative rationale that explains why acknowledging this history is important, stating that failing to do so could make Indigenous peoples feel lesser than the norm which could serve to dampen feelings of healing (21). As a result, all Canadian citizens should be educated on the history of residential schools in order to foster much needed healing among the victims who were and continue to be impacted by them.

In addition to fostering healing, it is important to teach about the history of residential schools in order to fully understand the current state of Aboriginal concerns within Canada. By educating citizens on this history it allows for the exposure of the tragic events that occurred within the schools. Specifically, the full extent of neglectful and abusive conditions within the schools can be revealed (Sharpe 2011, 1). From this acknowledgement, consequences of the harm felt by the victims can be recognised. Iwama (2000) confirms this by asserting knowledge of the residential school system can lead to understanding of the implications felt

by victims (250). By recognizing the trauma that survivors endured at the schools, connections can be made that indicate victims of the residential school system have an increased risk for negative psychological and social outcomes along with an increased vulnerability to poor well-being (Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman 2014, 321).

As a result of this knowledge, a contextualized understanding of current issues and conditions of concern within Aboriginal communities can be reached (Flisfeder 2010, 3). Concerns such as overrepresentations of Aboriginal peoples in jails as well as high rates of poverty, alcoholism and suicide can be attributed to personal experiences and intergenerational trauma that arose from the destructive means of the schools (Sharpe 2011, 5). Without understanding this process, which led some Aboriginal individuals to these saddening situations, there is a risk that these occurrences could be used to discriminate and misjudge these victims leading to further victimization (Faries 2004, 15). If the Canadian school system educated students about the events that took place in the residential schools, there becomes a possibility to discuss the harmful consequences they have caused. From this an educated and unbiased outlook on present day occurrences within Aboriginal communities could be reached leading to constructive outcomes in addressing these concerns (Gray 2011, 18). Consequently, it is important to teach all Canadian's the history of residential schools in order to contextualize current issues or concerns within Indigenous communities.

The ability to create a safer future is the third and final justification for why it is important that all citizens be taught the history of residential schools. By teaching Canadian citizens about the residential school history, government can be exposed as a source of danger in which authority can be abused. Through examining the residential school history there is clear evidence of government and other authorities advancing harmful agendas in which served to assimilate, marginalize and damage Indigenous peoples (Sharpe 2011, 3). Reviewing the history of the Canadian residential school system, it becomes evident that the government holds a lack of accountability in its duty to protect Aboriginal peoples (Nicol 2013, 23).

Knowledge about residential school history is important as it can serve as a warning of the devastating powers that authority can use to promote harmful acts, such as the cultural genocide against the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Through educating society about the residential school history it can also serve as a reminder to avoid repeating past mistakes which can lead to a better future. If society does not teach about this history it is concealing a mistake, in which doing so will lead to the failure to learn from it and could place society at risk for repeating it. Gray (2011) exemplifies this by stating a nation who remembers its past can keep its present from becoming a less desirable future (15). Cave (2013) states that without

knowledge Aboriginal peoples will be marginalized and portrayed as “unworthy of inclusion of the community or its protection” placing them at risk of harm yet again (86). Thus, by teaching the history of residential schools, society is better able to safeguard and protect against future threats to Aboriginal peoples as well as other residents of Canada.

In summary, Canadian society tends to remain silent about the tragic history and legacy of the Indian residential schools. In doing so, citizens fail to produce an environment that is empathetic, knowledgeable and respectful of Indigenous peoples. As demonstrated through the content of this report, it is important to reveal the truth regarding residential schools in order to promote healing, contextualize current issues and prevent society from repeating its mistakes. As a result, it can be concluded that it is an important objective to teach all Canadian citizens the history of the residential school system. Through this knowledge, Canada can become a more welcoming and prosperous nation that treats all individuals of society equitably.

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