Indigenous Perspectives on Formal Schooling

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Abstract

The Indigenous people of Canada have endured great hardships and injustices in the past that have greatly affected them as a people and as individuals. For about a century, the young and innocent were taken from their homes and communities and placed in residential schools. The formal educational system of the past failed many students, harmed many others, and attempted to destroy families and Indigenous language and culture. Today, formal education can be the catalyst for healing, if changes are made to curricula to infuse and include Indigenous perspectives.

The Indigenous people of Canada have suffered many assaults at the hands of government and educational leaders, with intergenerational effects that are still evident today. Possibly, the most purposely detrimental experience that the young had to endure was the residential school experience. Residential school violations to the structure of family, and of the mind, the body, and the soul were life changing and life threatening (Fontaine, 2010, p. 138). When the residential schools began to close in the 1960s, a new way to separate the young from their families reared its ugly head. The taking away of the children and placing them in foster care during the Sixties Scoop is another attack that the Indigenous people have experienced at the hands of the Canadian Government (Gray, 2013, p. 66). Because of the loss of their identity, the impacts of these acts still exist in the form of poverty and homelessness. Additionally, Canada's first people still experience many forms of racism. The current educational system and curricula may, to some extent, continue to perpetuate the disconnect between Indigenous perspectives and formal schooling.

Residential Schools

One of the darkest marks on Canadian history is the institutionalization of young Indigenous children in residential schools. The mandatory incarceration of these students into the government-sanctioned, Church-run facilities was unfair and unjust. It stunted the growth of the child as an Indigenous person by taking away the child's language, culture, and family connections. Education had always been integral to the Indigenous peoples' culture. As a child grew older, more people of the family and community would become influential in the child's learning. This learning occurred in the context of regular daily life, in the natural environment using nature, stories, song, tradition, ceremony and the seven teachings as the foundation for the child's growth and balance spiritually, emotionally, mentally and physically (Raven & Bjarnadottir, 2013). However, this epistemology was not valued by the white settlers as "education," and this differing opinion became an acceptable excuse to remove the children from their homes and communities under the guise of education, when in fact ulterior motives existed.

There did not seem to be just one purpose for the residential school system. Christensen (2013) described aggressive cultural assimilation as a key objective, and pointed out that "a parallel objective was to facilitate the displacement of Indigenous people from their land" (p. 811). She described the education that the children received at the residential schools as inadequate. A part of the teachings was to undermine the family and community by coercing the children to be ashamed of their languages and cultures. These children were also often victims of all forms of abuse and were frequently separated from their siblings and extended family by miles, which ensured that little to no communication of the atrocities could take place. The conditions and the actions endured by the Indigenous children at the schools had long-term

effects not only on those children who survived the experience, but also on future families and their relationships. It is difficult to learn how to love and communicate when the opportunity to experience them has been denied.

It is important to remember that the weapons used to assimilate the Indigenous people were used against the youngest, weakest, and least able or prepared to fight back – the children. These children had learned to trust and respect their families, community members, and Elders. They therefore placed the same trust in those who they thought would take care of them, their teachers, and instead were abused by them. The residential school experience for many children included shame, hunger, malnutrition, loneliness, fear, and hurt (Fontaine, 2010). The long-term impacts of the abusive treatment of the Indigenous children are a result of the effort "to kill the Indian in the child," as identified by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in the official apology given June 11, 2008 (as cited in The University of British Columbia, 2014, "Residential," para. 1). Unfortunately for the Indigenous people, residential schooling was not the end of the assaults on their culture or children.

The Sixties Scoop and Child and Family Services

In the 1960s, thousands of Indigenous children were once again taken from their homes and communities. This time, however, they were taken away not to be educated in a residential school, but to be given to non-Indigenous families in foster homes, supposedly for the children's own protection (Gray, 2013). This period of time in Canadian history is known as the Sixties Scoop. The child welfare system became the new instrument of assimilation for the government (Christensen, 2013). By this time, the families had endured many years of separation from their children, generation after generation, through the residential school system. Many parents had little understanding of how to be parents, because they themselves had not had their own role models to follow. The number of children apprehended, some under questionable circumstances, was staggering, and continues to be disproportionate to non-Indigenous removals today (Sinclair, 2007).

Many of the children placed in these foster or adoptive homes were once again faced with neglect, abuse or prejudice, as was the experience of the children in the residential school system. This time, however, the children had no hope of returning to their own homes, as they had when in the residential school system. The communities were once again faced with the devastation of having their young torn away from them with little to no hope of ever seeing their children again (Gray, 2013). The ulterior motive for the Indigenous transracial adoptions once again was for the assimilation of the young. The non-Indigenous adoptive parents often displayed discrimination and prejudice toward Indigenous people and therefore could not, and maybe would not, help the children to attain a sense of ethnic identity (Sinclair, 2007). Parenting is a difficult job due to the variety of skills and patience required to do it successfully. It is also a learning that is acquired over time, as children watch their parents and learn from all of the modelling that they receive over their childhood. The lack of an example of how to love, care, nurture, and teach would make the skills of parenting very difficult to attain. The children endured many forms of abuse when they were taken away from their homes and communities.

Proficiency in any skill or attitude requires learning through experience and exposure. Many Indigenous children had very little time to be with their own families while growing up, because the Indigenous people were first forcibly removed from their own homes and communities through residential schools from the late 1800s to the late 1900s, and then later in the 1960s during the Sixties Scoop. In both series of events, the children of the community were removed from their homes at a young age with little time, if any, to return to their families. This separation of child from family robbed the members of loving and learning with and from each other (Fontaine, 2010). This division would have detrimental effects on many of the young who grew up to become parents. Many survivors of the residential schools and the Sixties Scoop

found themselves not only unable to feel or be competent at raising a family, but many also had difficulty maintaining a place to call home.

Homelessness, Identity, and Poverty

Today, the Indigenous homeless have very complex stories and reasons for living in poverty and having no place to call their own, a home. Many of these stories include personal or family histories of traumatic events that caused the families to cease contact from each other and their community of origin (Christensen, 2013). Many of the Indigenous youth who were removed from their homes at an early age had difficulty finding their true identities, because their language and traditions were stolen from them. This lack of cultural identity was an assault on the individual's identity as well. Without knowing whom one is and where one comes from, it is difficult to know who and where one wants to be. Once again, the long-term impact of the removal of the young from their Indigenous families, communities, culture, language and way of life rears its ugly head. A home is not simply a building but all of the loving, sharing, and special moments and routines that are experienced within its walls, with all of the family members and culture that are integral to the sense of home (Christensen, 2013).

The children who were confined to the residential schools and subjected to the lessons taught by the nuns and priests came to believe that they were inferior to non-Indigenous people, and that they would never have the important jobs of leaders (Fontaine, 2010). This realization had tremendous negative effects on the children's confidence levels, which later created an obstacle to attaining and keeping jobs. The murder of the identity of the Indigenous young (in the residential schools) has had many effects on the education and poverty levels of the Indigenous people today (The University of British Columbia, 2014). Poverty is a cycle that is somewhat dependent on the level of education that a person has. Unfortunately, there can be many obstacles in the way of going to school when living in poverty. The need to make money is often cited as a reason for missing school, as are needing to care for siblings and conflicts with parents (Kanu, 2007). These disruptions in education make it difficult for the learners to continue participating in the educational system, and they frequently drop out. This decision will later affect the ability to earn a larger wage, and so continues the cycle of poverty. When one is told from a very young age that one has little value, it is difficult to overcome the effects of this internalized oppression.

The loss of cultural and individual identity has lifelong consequences. This loss of self invades other important aspects of a life. Taking a risk to attain a job and trying to perform well at it are difficult without a sense of self-efficacy. Without the ability to earn a decent wage, it is impossible to have a home and provide the necessities of life. Therefore, homelessness is linked to both the loss of identity and poverty in a cycle that, once in, is difficult to break. Society often is not kind to those who find themselves in this cycle of homelessness and helplessness. One of the highest poverty rates in Canada is found among Indigenous children (Kanu, 2007). Identity is important to the development of self-confidence, and when it is not developed it is difficult to move forward and work for what one wants.

Racism and Discrimination

Racism can be defined as the "poor treatment of or violence against people because of their race" ("Racism," 2014, para. 1), which may stem from "the belief that some races of people are better than others" ("Racism," 2014, para. 1). The Indigenous people of Canada have long been victims of overt and covert racism by European colonizers and other immigrants. This treatment began deep in history and continues today in many of the same ways (Neeganagwedgin, 2013). The destruction of the ways of life of the Indigenous people by the government, systems, and citizens of Canada makes it difficult for many Indigenous people to know who they are, let alone take pride in their own identities. This legacy of losing culture and

identity, in turn, results in the inability to believe in and respect oneself. This then becomes an excuse for others not to appreciate the individual or group, and often develops into an opinion of superiority endorsed by school curricula and government policies.

As the Europeans became established and learned from the Indigenous people how to live in the new land and survive the elements, the relationship began to change. These newcomers began to create a Canada that would be similar to their own country of origin, and to make these changes, new (to this land) ways of organizing needed to occur. The Indigenous people found that the land for which they had such deep reverence was beginning to be taken away in Treaty agreements that have only recently come under dispute. The spaces that individuals and groups occupy in many ways are a part of identity. When the Indigenous people were moved to Indian reserves, they lost their connection to their individual and collective history, and were forced to change (Schick, 2014). Their languages and education did not meet European standards. To change this educational issue, the *Indian Act* removed the children to residential schools, where they were taught not to speak in their mother tongue and to learn in a way not natural to them. These displaced people were given Indian reserve spaces to be (away from the growing cities), but were made homeless by the denial of all other factors that make a home a home. A relationship between different cultures that began with friendship and collaboration, changed once the newcomers became comfortable with their new surroundings.

The devastation endured by the Indigenous people from the destruction of cultural and individual identity in the past has unfortunately had detrimental impact on how these people are treated and viewed today. Many Indigenous people continue to experience discrimination due to their race. The Indigenous children continue to have issues with schooling for a variety of reasons, one still being "enduring racism by non-Indigenous students as well as some teachers" (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011, p. 94). Many Indigenous students are identified as low achievers, with poor motivation by teachers and society, as they often continue to have difficulty with the Eurocentric educational system (Neeganagwedgin, 2013). Today's educational system does not infuse Indigenous perspectives, cultures, or languages for Indigenous students to connect to. Not only would the Indigenous students benefit from this integration, but also all students would, because this is a part of Canada's history and the knowledge of the past may have the power to change opinion and understanding in the future. This omission may also be just another example of discrimination against Canada's Indigenous people, because the bilingual programs are often offered in schools that are more European in nature and "do not threaten white settler domination" (Schick, 2014, p. 93). The children must be given a chance to learn and experience success in our schools. This transformation and inclusion of Indigenous teachings may change how they view the world, how they view themselves, and how others view them.

Education Today

As the Indigenous people have experienced racism in the past, this experience continues in today's society because they are often being marginalized as they enter the educational system that includes very little of their histories, cultures, and heritages in curricula and practice (Neeganagwedgin, 2013). The teachings that were, and are, important to the Indigenous people and the way of learning that has been their way for hundreds of years are not a part of the modern classroom, and have not been since the residential school system began. As the learning needs and infusion of the Indigenous culture are not being met, neither are the students' basic needs. Many of these children live in poverty, which brings with it a slew of other issues, including hunger and absenteeism (Kanu, 2007). For schools to meet the needs of the Indigenous learner, changes in curricula, programming, policies, and funding need to occur. The school system also needs to begin to repair the damaged relationship that exists with many of the parents of these children. The time has come again for the village to raise the child. This healing can happen only if all stakeholders work together in a respectful and collaborative way.

The educational system would better serve the Indigenous students by including their culture in the school experience and decreasing the disenfranchisement that they experience today.

In many learning experiences, educators look for students to connect to the teaching in some way. The lack of infusion of Indigenous topics and practice in all subject areas makes it difficult for those learners to connect, or even want to connect, to the information (Godlewska, Moore, & Bednasek, 2010). A part of the Indigenous culture is to learn important life lessons from the Elders as well as parents and the community (Rasmussen, 2011). In the past, the land was also an important teacher for the Indigenous people. In today's schools, the learning and imparting of knowledge comes from a Western-trained teacher or, worse yet, a technological device. The system must ensure that the children feel safe and not judged when they are present at school. It must try to meet the needs of the whole child: basic, academic, and cultural (Neeganagwedgin, 2013). Many of the parents of Indigenous students are either survivors of the residential schools or suffer their intergenerational effects, and they therefore have very little trust in the school system and possibly unpleasant memories of their own childhood school experiences. Schools need to be transparent with these parents and demonstrate a true desire to serve the child and the family.

Canadian schools and curriculum developers must infuse Indigenous practice, culture, and information into the lessons, because all Canadians should understand the history of Canada and its First People. The educational system must become more sensitive and aware of the strife that many Indigenous families living in poverty experience every day. Through this sensitivity, new ideas may arise that may better suit the needs of these learners. The lack of trust in the educational system, instilled in the survivors of the residential schools by their captors, is evident in the relationships and attitudes that they have today with the system and their own children. A relationship between home and school must begin to take shape. The stakeholders must begin to understand that the Indigenous way is a different way, but it may benefit us all to learn from Indigenous teachings as well. Education is key in knowing and understanding the complexities of life. This learning does not simply happen within the four walls of a classroom, but in experiencing life itself.

Conclusion

At one time, North America, once known as Turtle Island, was the home to only Indigenous people, who had their own culture, traditions, stories, and ceremonies, which were all a part of a complex educational system (Neegan, 2005). A few hundred years ago, the demographic of the land changed and people from Europe came to inhabit this land. For a while, these people from varied origins shared the space and benefitted from the knowledge and wisdom of the Indigenous people. Then attitudes began to change toward the Indigenous people and their way of life. Eventually, these attitudes and Eurocentric ways became the common and accepted model of living and Colonization began. Residential schools and the Sixties Scoop drastically changed the educational and family practices of the Indigenous people, eventually leading to the homelessness and poverty experienced today. Racism and discrimination have changed life as the Indigenous people knew it to be, but maybe not forever. Curricula can be changed and infused with Indigenous perspectives, leading to an inclusive educational system for the future.

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