

BACKGROUND

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA: *A RESPONSE TO THE LEGACY OF INDIGENOUS RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS*



SETTING THE CONTEXT

THE 3 SPHERES OF THE TRC

HISTORICAL

For centuries, Indigenous communities and individuals have suffered at the hands of Canadian colonial powers, institutions and their policies. One of the many tools used to assimilate and colonize Indigenous people was the residential school system which operated from the end of the 19th century until the end of the 20th century. Residential schools were a means to accomplish a cultural genocide against the Indigenous population. Residential schools injured and destroyed familial and cultural bonds and were an institution where neglect and abuse against students were very prominent. Most of this history has been buried, concealed and even ignored, until the brave survivors of residential schools found the strength and support to shed light on their experiences through thousands of court cases that consequently led to the biggest class-action lawsuit in Canadian history.

THE 3 SPHERES OF THE TRC

POLITICAL

Indigenous nations have been negatively impacted due to disease, relocation, and assimilationist government policies, resulting in the fragmenting of bands, reserves and small settlements (1). The need for collective unity and reconstruction as nations is due to colonialism. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created as a response to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). In the struggle to resolve historical and continuous conflicts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and establish harmony, reconciliation emerged as a key concept. The Commission was an independent body that provided a platform for Indigenous people who were affected by the residential school legacy both directly and indirectly. The goal of the Commission was to learn the truth to set a path for reconciliation. It is important to note that Reconciliation is not an Indigenous concern, but a Canadian one.

THE 3 SPHERES OF THE TRC

SOCIAL

Residential schools were the result of the missionaries and colonial governments' efforts to practically "kill the Indian in the child" (2). Indigenous people, including their cultures and beliefs, were perceived as inferior to Europeans. Residential schools were "intended to bring civilization and salvation to [Indigenous] children" (3). These colonial and assimilative intentions were destructive to Indigenous families and communities, as well as Indigenous languages, spirituality, and culture. Indigenous children were often forcefully taken away from their homes, and were neglected, malnourished, and physically and sexually abused in residential schools. Indigenous people have been depicted as "savage warriors or onlookers who were irrelevant to the more important history of Canada: the story of European settlement," as well as impoverished and dysfunctional (4). The narratives and experiences of Indigenous people were largely ignored. This results in a view that Indigenous people "were and are to blame" for their situations, "as though there were no external causes" (5). Indigenous communities successfully existed on this land, now known as Canada, far before European contact. Colonialism, assimilation, and cultural genocide has caused "significant barriers to reconciliation, including conflicting values, lack of trust, and differing views" on how resources should be distributed (6). Reconciliation demands addressing the complex, lasting and deeply rooted historical issues. Many of the social problems which exist in Indigenous communities, such as high unemployment, alcoholism, domestic violence, and family breakdown, are the result of centuries of systemic violence and assimilation (7). Although Indigenous people have faced many hardships, they have not surrendered their identities and it was their courage and efforts which brought the legacy of residential schools to public attention.

THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCE PHOTO- GRAPHED



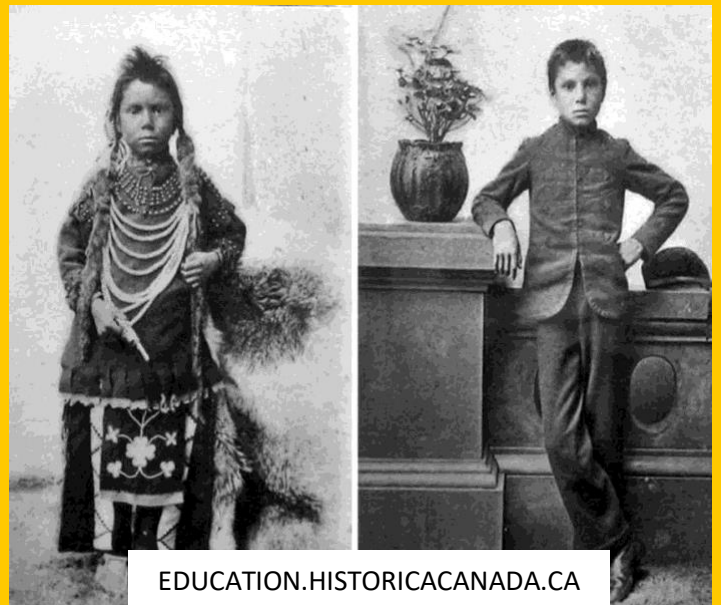
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KEY CHARACTERS INVOLVED

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SURVIVORS, INDIGENOUS FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES



THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES



THE MANDATE & THE PROCESS

The Commission was mandated over the course of five years to accomplish various goals that would mainly support the process of truth, healing and reconciliation. One mandate was to establish an accurate and public historical record involving the residential schools' purpose, policies and operations, as well as the narratives and experiences of students, their families, and communities. The Commission brought together documents and reports about residential schools and their legacy, and the parties were obligated to provide them with some exceptions. It was also assigned to complete a public report including recommendations to every party involved in the Settlement. Furthermore, the Commission funded many truth and reconciliation events in various communities. The Commission hosted seven National Events across Canada to encourage public awareness and education, regarding the impacts and legacy of residential schools (8). These events "served as important milestones over the course of the... six-year mandate" and created an opportunity for survivors and their families to speak on a forum (9). Art played a major role in the statements gathered by the Commission and explored various themes of trauma, loss, denial, complicity, apology, government policy, truth, and healing (10). The Commission supported commemoration initiatives for funds that went to survivors and community events, and many were arts-related projects (11). A National Research Centre was established that housed the records, documents and oral statements gathered by the Commission, which is accessible to the general public (12). Accessing the archives for the Commission's research and even for public records was not without "bureaucratic and legal roadblocks" (13). The National Research Centre was renamed the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, and It became an "evolving, Survivor-centred model of education for reconciliation" and bears a permanent public record of survivors' testimonies and the history and legacy of the school system (14).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission operated between 2007 and 2015. For six years, the Commission travelled all over Canada to listen to Indigenous survivors. More than six thousand witnesses came forward, and most of them were students who lived in residential schools (15). Their experiences of hunger, abuse, neglect, hard labour, and so on challenged the global image of Canada as a country of democracy, peace, and kindness.



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THE OUTCOMES & LEGACY

In February of 2012, the Commission released an *Interim Report* including their findings, recommendations, and a short history of residential school (16). A big priority of the report was the development of the school curriculums to include the legacy of residential schools (17). The mandate of the Commission considered reconciliation as an ongoing process involving both individuals and the collective population in Canada (18). In 2015, the Commission released its final multi-volume report, which discussed the Commissions' actions and processes and the evidence collected, as well as what was heard, read, and concluded.

The legacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is significant as it placed the narratives and experiences of Indigenous people, especially students, on the national agenda. It also prioritized the process of reconciliation. The Commission released a guiding set of principles for truth and reconciliation, which shaped the calls to action that were issued. The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* was implemented as the framework for reconciliation in Canada (19). The Commission called for the recognition and respect of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people as the original people of Canada and as self-determining people, with Treaty, constitutional, and human rights (20). The Commission jumpstarted a process of public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration that both acknowledge and redress past injustices (21). Moreover, the Commission shed light on the need for constructive action in addressing the ongoing destructive legacies of colonialism which impact Indigenous education, culture, languages, health, welfare, justice, and economic opportunity and prosperity (22). It also demonstrated the shared responsibility of every Canadian in establishing and maintaining mutually respectful relationships (23). The Commission prioritized cultural revitalization, oral histories, Indigenous laws, protocols, and land connections, as well as the perspectives of Indigenous Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers in the ethical, conceptual, and practical spheres of long-term reconciliation (24). It also prioritized political will, joint leadership, trust building, accountability, transparency, a substantial investment of resources, and ongoing public education and dialogue (25).

The Final Report demonstrates the courage of survivors and their families in sharing their experiences with the public. It also acknowledges that reconciliation "must become a way of life" and will take several years to repair the broken trust and relationships (26). The Commission concluded that reconciliation is not only apologies, reparations, relearning history, and public commemoration, but also "real social, political, and economic change" (27). It called on governments, churches, educational institutions, and Canadians to take action in concrete ways and work collaboratively with Indigenous people (28).

PUBLIC & SCHOLARLY ASSESSMENTS

In the article “Uncomfortable Comparisons: The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in International Context,” Matt James analyzes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in regard to a regime change, the relative power of victims and perpetrators, the nature of the injustices, and the nature of the mandate in terms of fault-finding capabilities, the range of injustice it will address, and if it has enough resources. According to these factors, James was not optimistic about the possible impacts of the commission. Firstly, the same government under which these injustices were enabled persists today. James argues that the “key political foundations on which the residential school’s policy developed” still exist, which are the Indian Act, the reservation system, and the status of Indigenous communities as “constitutionally subordinated jurisdictions controlled by a government primarily accountable to outsiders” (29). Furthermore, the victims continue to face oppression, the legacies of colonization, and are “largely poor minorities” (30). James argues that residential schools are a more “difficult injustices scenario... [where] there was widespread societal[, political and institutional] complicity... and victims [were] targeted on the basis of group membership” (31). He also argues that the mandate, timeframe and resources of the Commission are quite limited. In another article written in 2012 titled “A Carnival of Truth?” James states that the Commission’s guidelines and funding criteria define the notion of reconciliation in quite general terms, which refers to reconciliation as building and maintaining better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (32). However, he demonstrates that the emphasis of the Commission on affective awareness and interpersonal understanding can “help prepare the ground for more inclusive kinds of democratic deliberation anchored in a more widespread settler awareness of Indigenous histories and aspirations” (33). Ronald Niezen similarly states: “Effective stories have the capacity to shape the narrations and audience responses that follow” (34). In the article, James goes on to argue that deeply rooted colonial aspects of the discursive frames, including the ‘residential schools syndrome’ framing, that are promoted by the Canadian government and media often ignore questions of political self-determination and control of land (35). The truth telling by survivors is crucially important, as well as acknowledgement, understanding, healing, and forgiveness, however, James illustrates that these “may be... unable to do justice to the political and economic concerns of Indigenous communities” (36). James argues that the “emphasis on victims voices and experiences perform actively overturns the basic pedagogy of the residential schools,” and is a form of symbolic reparation oriented towards transformation (37). James demonstrates how the residential schools were much more than individual experiences, and also “about specific Canadian acts and decisions, ones made, in many cases, by still-living individuals and established, ongoing institutions” (38). The gaps that have been created might be better acknowledged with a “more aggressively fault-finding focus” (39).

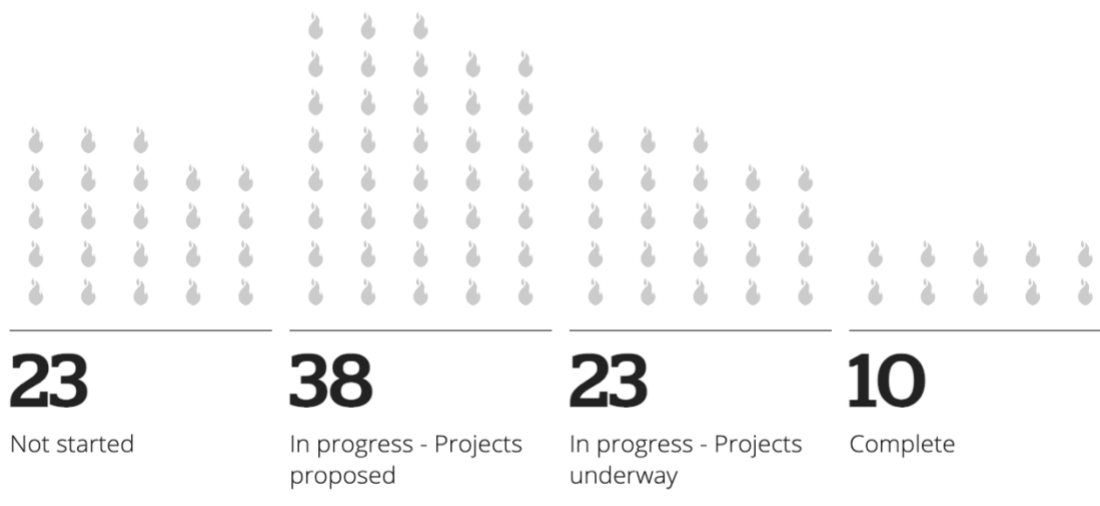
PUBLIC & SCHOLARLY ASSESSMENTS

In the article, “Historical Research at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” Brian Gettler, a historian who worked with the Commission, states: “reconciliation discourse may obscure continued Indigenous marginalization that is not easily tied to the [Indigenous residential school] system... while, at the same time, reaffirming the national narrative of multiculturalism through generalized eagerness to discuss precisely this ugly historical truth” (40). Gettler also reaffirms the limitation of the timeframe which James mentions, when he states that the “time pressures fundamentally shaped [his] work” (41). Some have argued that in contexts where conflict perseveres, reconciliation is more complex, and others argue it cannot occur. Vo argues that “reconciliation can and should be integrated into different steps of conflict transformation” (42). In a book published in 2009, Gerald Alfred claims that reconciliation cannot exist without full restitution, which would be for the lost land and resources, as well as an end to the policies that continuously sabotage Indigenous self-governance and well-being (43). Drawing upon the survivor experiences, the Commission revealed a tension “created by the aim to repair and renew personal and political relationships that calls for an ‘overcoming’ or ‘healing’ of difficult emotions for the sake of fostering a process of reconciliation” (44).

Ian Mosby, a historian who has exposed the harsh injustices of the school system, publicly argues that it is very important for Canada to meet the ninety-four calls to action that the Commission set out (45). A total of ten calls to action have been completed. In regard to the government’s relationship with Indigenous people, Mosby and Eva Jewell state there has been “hard work on the symbols, while avoiding the substance” (46). Regarding the ones that have been completed, Mosby states: “they are very simple to complete, or they are calls for things that were already happening to continue” (47). Considering the entire Commission was jumpstarted due to a large class action and settlement, Canada seems to not be taking much greater responsibilities to make progressive changes.

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ENDNOTES

1. *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 206.
2. *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 130.
3. Ibid., 43.
4. Ibid., 235.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 304.
7. Ibid., 385.
8. Ibid., 23.
9. Ibid., 30.
10. Ibid., 281-282.
11. Ibid., 23 & 282.
12. Ibid., 23.
13. Ibid., 255.
14. Ibid., 264.
15. Ibid., 9.
16. Ibid., 33.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 275.
19. *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation*, 4.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 184.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 185.
29. Matt James, "Uncomfortable Comparisons: The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in International Context," *Les Ateliers de l'Éthique* 5, no. 2 (2010): 28.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 28-29.
32. Matt James, "A Carnival of Truth? Knowledge, Ignorance and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* (2012):15.
33. Ibid.
34. Ronald Niezen, *Truth and Indignation Canadas Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017): 71.
35. James, "A Carnival of Truth?" 16.

36. Ibid., 18.
37. Ibid., 21.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Brian Gettler, "Historical Research at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," *The Canadian Historical Review* 98, no. 4 (2017): 653.
41. Ibid., 664.
42. Dan Sinh Nguyen Vo, "Reconciliation and Conflict Transformation," *Beyond Intractability* (July, 2008).
43. Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, "Restitution is the Real Pathway to Justice for Indigenous Peoples," in Gregory Younging, Jonathan Dewar and Mike DeGagné, eds. *Response, Responsibility and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey* (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009), 179-181.
44. Reynaud, Anne-Marie. "Dealing with Difficult Emotions: Anger at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada." *Anthropologica* 56, no. 2 (2014).
45. "Curious about How Many of the TRC's Calls to Actions Have Been Completed? Check Ian Mosby's Twitter | CBC Radio." CBCnews. October 20, 2017.
46. Jewell, Eva and Ian Mosby. "Calls to Action Accountability: A Status Update on Reconciliation." *Yellowhead Institute*, 17 December 2019.
47. Ibid.

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<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/how-are-you-putting-reconciliation-into-action-1.4362219/curious-about-how-many-of-the-trc-s-calls-to-actions-have-been-completed-check-ian-mosby-s-twitter-1.4364330>.
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