

Research paper The Effects of Residential Schools on First Nations - APA style

A residential school was an educational institution “established by the Canadian government and the Roman Catholic missionaries to see native people abandon their culture heritage and adopt the presumably civilized ways of Europeans including wearing European dress, living as whites, speaking English, and working as farmers” (Furniss, 2000). In fact, the Canadian Indian residential school system was intended to force the assimilation of the aboriginal peoples in Canada into European-Canadian society. The first residential school was established in 1840, after which the number of these schools rapidly spread all over Canada, reaching a total of 76 schools (Barnes, 2006). However, in 1950, the number of these schools started to decrease when the Canadian government began altering its policy toward First Nations. The last residential school was closed in 1996

The decline of residential schools was due to the fact that aboriginal students were treated badly at these institutions. For example, an aboriginal student said that, “At these schools, boys were chopping grain and hauling wood while girls were baking and doing laundry” (Deiter, 1999). Also, aboriginal children were taken from their families and societies to be students at these schools and would spend many years without contacting their loved ones. “Nobody even came to see us for Christmas” said John, a former pupil (Deiter, 1999). As a result of residential schools, many students suffered several serious consequences, such as suicide, sexual abuse, and low self-esteem. Further, for the First Nations people, residential schooling was a terrible experience for its harmful and continuous impacts. Mostly, residential schools have negatively affected First Nations in three areas: behaviour, health, and academic performance.

One of the areas that residential schools negatively affected First Nations is behaviour. “During most of the years of residential schools' operations, corporal punishment was a widely accepted approach to discipline in the Euro-Canadian culture”(Barnes, 2006). The behavior that was learned at these residential schools was later transferred to family and community life. The native people of today still suffer from family abuse, violence towards women and children, as well as higher rates of illegal and delinquent behaviour.

Furthermore, there was a high rate of sexual abuse by staff at these schools, and many children experienced unwanted sexual contact (Barnes, 2006). Children exposed to severe and chronic maltreatment such as bullying, physical abuse, or sexual abuse are at increased risk for developing psychological disturbances, posttraumatic stress disorder and major depression, for example(Barnes, 2006). Additionally, according to Gaskins, “57% [of aboriginal students] had admitted to using illicit drugs, and 62% had juvenile records”.

As a result, later generations of First Nations faced the serious impact of these schools”(Gaskins, 2010). “In the later years of residential schools' operations, children increasingly experienced alcoholism and sometimes neglect and abuse in their families prior to departure for residential school” (Barnes, 2006). These parents had been former students at residential schools who were coping with their psychological consequences through substance and family abuse. The danger to aboriginal health was not only indirect risk factors such as alcohol, but also direct maltreatment at the residential schools themselves.

Many aboriginal students suffered from diseases because of the abuse in these schools. In many cases the abuse they endured led to increased risk of illness. As the native children were removed from their traditional environments they lost their traditional views about diet and health and were introduced to European eating and diet, including alcohol. Many of today's native population suffer from serious malnutrition.

The list of risks for bodily harm continue; there were a significant number of deaths related to suicides, accidents, and drowning; high alcohol consumption was also found to be a factor in a significant proportion of deaths (Barton, 2005). In addition, "lower self-reported health scores for Aboriginal residential school survivors may suggest a higher prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder exists among members of this group[aboriginal students]" (Barton, 2005). Clearly the behavioural and physical health problems are related.

To complicate matters further, many of the problems of the Aboriginal people come from their lack of appropriate education. Residential schools were not established to improve students' knowledge, or the productive skills of students, but rather to convert the First Nations people into a European-like population. The education focused on religion and the etiquette of European culture. Often the staff and teachers at these schools were less than prepared to properly teaches the students.

Much of the research supports the fact that adolescents in residential care had significant learning problems. For example, Jackson reviewed 20 years of study to show that children in residential and foster care fell progressively behind academically (Gaskin, 2010). "Students scored significantly lower in broad math and fluency" (Gaskin, 2010). For example, maltreated children had significantly poorer performance on cognitive measures of math and reading than non-maltreated children; maltreated children were more likely to repeat a grade and have discipline referrals (Barnes, 2006). Academic gains could be attributed to the small class sizes and the fact that many of these students were attending school regularly for the first time (Gaskin, 2010).

Systemic inadequacies in academic and vocational training, staffing, and educational methods meant that the students who remained at the residential schools faced extraordinary difficulties in obtaining either a good academic education or useful vocational training (Barnes, 2006). After World War II, improvements in school funding and educational policies were associated with rapid improvements in aboriginal students' progress; the number of students in Grades 9 to 13 advanced from 0 in 1945 to 2,144 in 1959, and 6,384 a decade later(Barnes, 2006). "The poor quality of classroom learning experiences and the residential schools' low performance expectations placed aboriginal children at significant risk for poor academic achievement and self-esteem as well as difficulties in broader social development" (Barnes, 2006).

Since the decline and closure of residential schools, it is obvious that scholars and government officials agreed that the residential schools of the past had negative effects on the education, health and overall behavioural outcomes of the First Nations People. Although the Canadian government realized this and decided to stop all residential schools, the many years of effort for assimilation in this manner had done great damage to the aboriginal people. The children and grandchildren of the abused students have

inherited the socially delinquent behaviours from these schools in the forms of family abuse, drug and alcohol addictions, low self-esteem and life satisfaction. Now, the Canadian government and the native people are trying to rebuild a once successful culture. The road is not easy, however, as much of their culture was lost or destroyed by assimilation, a large part of which was the establishment of the many residential schools across Canada.