

Aboriginal abuse in
the canadian indian
residential school
social work essay



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A look at the role of the government and the impact of the residential schools on the Aboriginal individuals and their communities
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From 1879 to 1996, Canadian Aboriginal people were forced to send their children away to governmental residential schools administered by the Church. In these schools, the children were victims of abuse and the horrible actions inflicted on them had many negative repercussions in the moment and in their futures. The Aboriginal communities were also deeply affected by the IRSS because of the physical and psychological abuse their members went through. During the 117 years of the program, the Canadian government and the Church, respectively mandated to administer and run the residential schools, were abusive, violent and mistreated the children under their responsibility. During the period of time in which the IRSS took place, more than 150,000 Aboriginal children were taken away from their families and communities and sent to residential schools ("First Nations in Canada," 2007). The intention of the Canadian government, when creating the system, was to alienate the children from their parents and their tribal customs (Grant, 1996, p. 84). In fact, in 1879, the IRSS was mandated as a constitutional obligation to "educate" Indigenous children (Gray, 2011) and "to kill the Indian in the child" (Hanson, 2010). The whole IRSS program was "based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal" (Hanson, 2010). The Government was in charge of the regulation of the schools and the Church was in charge of the running of the institutions. In the IRSS, child mistreatment took place that destroyed individuals and their communities. Most of the children in the residential schools were victims of sexual, physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual

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torment, public humiliation and punishment for cultural expression, living in military and prison-style discipline (Gray, 2011).

Children Mistreatment

Physical, emotional and spiritual abuse in the IRSS.

Approximately two thirds of all Aboriginal people in Canada have experienced trauma directly resulting from the abuse imposed on them in the IRSS (Quinn, 2007). The children were abused in many ways. In the residential schools, the indigenous child could be victim of sexual assault[1]by men or women in authority (Chrisjohn & Maraun, 1997, p. 31). Performing " private pseudo-official inspections of genitalia of girls and boys" (Chrisjohn & Maraun, 1997, p. 32) was common. The children were often beaten to the point of unconsciousness, drawing blood or serious permanent or semi-permanent injuries,[2]and physical mistreatment was used as a form of punishment by the authorities.[3]The Aboriginal children were not only physically abused, but also psychologically. The residential school authorities used public abuse to humiliate and harm the children.[4]They also prohibited the use of all Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal religious or spiritual practices, a spiritual form of abuse. Removal of children from their homes, families and community was another psychological form of abuse towards the children and their mothers (Quinn 2007). Attachment is the " social and emotional relationship children develop with the significant people in their lives [...]. An infant's first attachment is usually formed with its mother, although in some circumstances another adult can become the primary attachment figure" (Caye, et al., 1996). The process of attachment begins at birth and helps developing intellectual capacities such as organization,

logical thinking, self-reliance and coping mechanism for stress, frustration, fear or worry (Allen, et al., 1983). It also gives the children the possibility to form " healthy and intimate relationships" (Allen, et al., 1983). By removing the children from the person he is attached to will have direct psychological consequences on for all the benefits attachment can have.

The Consequences of the IRSS

Consequences of the IRSS on the Aboriginal individuals.

There are mixed outcomes for the mistreated children (Million, 2000).

However, due to the abuse in the residential schools, a strong majority of the children developed negative behaviours such as cultural shame and personal and collective silence concerning the abuse (Gray, 2011). The brainwashing they have been put through made them feel ashamed to have an Aboriginal culture and to be who they are. Many children developed health problems of psychological nature. For example, the survivors of this system suffered posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), similar to what is experienced by returning war veterans and survivors of genocides (Gray, 2011; Quinn 2007).

Studies show that all the abuse the children were drawn into in the residential schools had a direct negative impact on their future lives as adults. The IRSS abuse affected not only the individuals who attended these institutions, but also their children and their descendants (Gagne, 1998; Quinn, 2007) through disturbing the intergenerational transfer of parenting skills. Without these essential skills, many survivors have had difficulties when raising their own children (Milloy, 1999, p. 299). For example, Billie-Jeanne is a participant of the urban Native youth, a non-profit society to help First Nations youth integrate an urban and modern setting (" Urban Native

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Youth Association"), and a first line descendant of an IRSS descendant. When interviewed, she observed in her immediate environment that residential schools took people away from their families. According to her, the environment the children were brought into was not a nurturing environment. Therefore, when it was their turn to have children, the abused individuals did not know how to take care of their children. All they knew was mistreatment (Gray, 2011). This idea follows Bandura's social learning theory; family violence is cyclical as individuals learn from observing and imitating people around them, such as violent family members (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, these individuals may tend to model and reproduce the violent behaviour of their family members on other people surrounding them. Bandura's theory explains why Aboriginal people who have survived the IRSS reproduced, in their families, the violent and abusive relationships they learned while they were in the residential schools. The legacy of children removal from their families and communities, still impacts the mothers and their communities (Hanson, 2010). The process of early detachment of the children from his mother, or other adult, will directly harm the child's intellectual development and all of the benefits of attachment (Allen, et al., 1983). Children traumatised by early separations from their parents will then " display low self-esteem, a general distrust of others, mood disorders (including depression and anxiety), socio-moral immaturity, and inadequate social skills" (Allen, et al., 1983). Many family relationships have been completely destroyed by the governmental program. Sharon Blakeborough, an IRSS survivor and daughter of another IRSS survivor, in retrospection, was able to realize her mother did love her, but she wasn't capable of showing it to her, like a mother should do. " The residential

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schools did that to her," she says (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 128). The proportion of Aboriginal individuals from Québec and Labrador that have had suicidal thoughts in their life is 33% for survivors of the IRSS and 22% for the Aboriginal that haven't been to the residential schools. 22% of survivors have had a suicidal attempt compared to 9% for non-residents. The proportion of children that dropped out of their school year is of 37% for non-resident children and 67% for survivors (Commission de la santé et des services sociaux des Premières Nations du Québec et du Labrador, 2011). This data is a clear representation of the effects of the IRSS. People who survived the residential schools continue to struggle with their identity since they have been taught to hate themselves and their culture (Milloy, 1999, p. 299). Therefore, the intergenerational effects are manifest. It is currently estimated that over 25, 000 Aboriginal children across Canada are within the child welfare system (Blackstock, 2003). Even though Native youth comprise only 5% of the child/youth population in Canada, they represent 30% to 40% of all children in care (Human Resources Development/Statistics Canada, 2006).

Consequences of the IRSS on the Aboriginal communities

All the abuse described previously not only affected the individuals, but also had strong consequences on the Aboriginal faith, culture, families and communities of the children who were part of the Indian Residential Schooling System. Historically, the Canadian First Nations satisfied " their material and spiritual needs" (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2007) through the natural resources surrounding them.

However, the school authorities would force children to abandon their

traditional languages, religion, clothing and lifestyle to impose the Catholic, United, Anglican or Presbyterian traditions and faith. The responsible nuns, priests and social workers " attempted to articulate, negotiate, and enforce certain valued constructions of gender, class, and race, sexuality, and spirituality within a group of children" (Million, 2000). The system caused a strong devastation from land base, culture, families and Aboriginal language (Gray, 2011). Although the IRSS was finally put to an end, the Aboriginal individuals the repercussions are still present. The Aboriginal people continued to believe that they belonged to a culture different from the one imposed on them by the residential schools, an Aboriginal culture, but were ashamed of it (Million, 2000). Moreover, negative effects of the Indian Residential Schooling System are felt on modern Aboriginal communities. The report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples blamed the IRSS for the high rates of suicide, substance abuse, and family dysfunction in Aboriginal communities (Francis, 2011). For example, the rate of suicide for Aboriginal communities is almost four and a half times higher than the 2001 overall Canadian rate (" Santé des Premières nations et des Inuits", 2011). Sharon Blakeborough, the young IRSS survivor, describes her recent experience in her family's community after coming back from the residential schools: " There were no values. It was nothing like the traditional days, because the residential schools, the poverty, the alcohol had all done their job to take away from us everything we held sacred." (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 126). Because of what they learned in residential schools, the children observed that " adults often exert power and control through abuse" (Milloy, 1999, p. 299). By reproducing this same pattern, the communities are therefore regulated on violence and power abuse. This idea follows <https://assignbuster.com/aboriginal-abuse-in-the-canadian-indian-residential-school-social-work-essay/>

Bandura's social learning theory: violence is cyclical as individuals from a community learn from observing and imitating people, such as violent individuals around them (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, these community individuals may tend to model and reproduce the violent behaviour of their community members on other people surrounding them creating communities controlled by violence and power. Bandura's theory explains why Aboriginal people who have survived the IRSS reproduced, in their communities, the violent and abusive attitudes they learned while they were in the residential schools.

Religious and Political Implications

The intentions of governmental and ecclesiastic authorities.

The education of Native peoples in the Indian Residential Schooling System became "symbolic to the power of the State and Church to dictate assimilation" (Million, 2000). The Canadian government was mandated to provide an education to all Aboriginal children of the country. The two primary objectives of the residential schools were to "remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures" and to "assimilate them into the dominant culture" (Hanson, 2010). With the collaboration of Ecclesiastic authorities, the education the children would receive was aimed to civilize and assimilate them ("First Nations in Canada" 2007). Both authorities worked together to achieve the given goal. They wanted to fit the Aboriginal people into the lower classes of the twentieth century in Canada. Consequently, the schools were placed far from Aboriginal reserves to minimize parental influence (Titley, 1992 quoted in Chrisjohn & Maraun, 1997, p. 46). According to the established plan, the

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residential schools revealed themselves to be completely insane for the children. " These so-called schools, run by the churches and supported by the federal government, often failed to protect [the Aboriginal] children" when they should have edified a nurturing pedagogy (Gray, 2011). For example, the Church did not report the incidents of abuse to the attention of higher authorities. The Ecclesiastic authorities also neglected their educational mandate by focusing more on intimidation and discipline than giving new knowledge to the children of their charge (Chrisjohn & Maraun, 1997, p. 33).

The management of the IRSS.

The federal government took some inappropriate decisions of action and omitted others that would have been necessary for the well-being of the children of the residential schools. The government failed to inspect or maintain effective supervision of the institutions and to fund the Ecclesiastic authorities in order for them to maintain " the physical health of their legal wards" (Chrisjohn & Maraun, 1997, p. 33). The government also failed to respect the treaties signed with the First Nations promising education for Aboriginal Peoples. The Canadian government should not have collaborated to cover up the officials' criminal behaviour. Both authorities failed to protect children under their care from sexual predations and remove the offenders from positions control (" The Anglican Church of Canada to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples" 1993, quoted in Chrisjohn & Maraun, 1997, p. 34).

The Healing Process

The modern implications of the federal government.

In the 1960s, some first steps were taken by the government in order to try and help the children that have survived the IRSS. Yet, the social workers of the child welfare system put in place were unaware of the culture or history of the Aboriginal communities they tried to help (Hanson, 2010). They did not take into account that fact that Aboriginal culture was different for their own. The measures from the child welfare system of the 1960s were then completely inefficient. Since the turn of the new millennium, survivors of the IRSS have begun to receive more helpful reparations for the traumatising experiences. Survivor-initiated class action suits have progressed into a "shared experience lawsuit against the Government of Canada" (Gray, 2011). Some actions have been taken by the Canadian government and other institutions to try and make up for more than a century of abuse. For example, a Healing Fund was created in 1998 (Million, 2000) and the Aboriginal Health Transition Fund (AHTF) was put in place in 2005 (Commission de la santé et des services sociaux des Premières Nations du Québec et du Labrador, 2011). Both programs were designed to support the First Nation communities' healing from the IRSS and to help acknowledge efforts were required to decrease the large gap between the health status of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (Commission de la santé et des services sociaux des Premières Nations du Québec et du Labrador, 2011). The federal government also created the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which forced an unavoidable public statement on the history of the IRSS and of the government's role in its

legacy (Gray, 2011). The IRSSA provided, inter alia, the creation of a commission to inform all Canadians about the history and legacy of the residential schools (Francis, 2011). The Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program was also put in place by the Canadian government. Thanks to this program, emotional and cultural support are available, which are services provided by local Aboriginal organizations. Required services are determined by the individuals' needs and include dialogue, Aboriginal religious ceremonies or professional mental health counselling (Santé Canada, 2011). Before June 11, 2008, the Canadian government's historic role in the development and administration of the residential schools had never been acknowledged. On this day, an apology from the Canadian government, accompanied by the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, the United and Presbyterian churches, was made to the First Nations. Prime Minister Stephen Harper officially apologized to survivors of the IRSS on behalf of the Canadian government for its role in administering over 130 federally-funded Indian residential schools during a 165-year time span (Gray, 2011).

What still needs to be done.

Although the Indian residential schools no longer remain, consequences still continue into the present day even with the actual social measures put in place by the federal government. Urban Native youth recognized and stated that one of the most pressing concerns in Native communities today is the need for healing from the intergenerational effects of the IRSS (Gray, 2011). Sharon Blakeborough, an IRSS survivor, stated the children that suffered from the IRSS must be told that what they have lived through " is wrong and they have a right to be protected, that they are infinitely precious little

people". According to Blakeborough, they must be told again and again that they do not have to live in a world " with sexual abuse and neglect and the chaos of adult relationships" in order for these hurt individuals to heal and go on with positive lives (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 126). For the Aboriginal individuals and their communities, there should be a better integration of suited health care and increased participation of the Aboriginal peoples in the creation and management of health programs and services (Commission de la santé et des services sociaux des Premières Nations du Québec et du Labrador, 2011). The process of reconciliation between the Aboriginal people and the rest of the country is not only about allowing Aboriginal people to heal with many health programs put in place by the government; it is also about non-Aboriginal people learning to bear the responsibilities they have had in the issue. Each Canadian individual has a small part of responsibility and has to acknowledge the ways he has profited from the inequities and injustices perpetrated in the name of the Canadian religious and political authorities (Francis, 2011). To conclude, the Indian Residential Schooling System was based upon the idea that Aboriginal people had to be assimilated to the dominant Canadian culture and removed from their communities. This project of the Canadian government, in association with the Church, had disastrous consequences because of the tremendous amount of physical, psychological and spiritual abuse inflicted on the children in the residential schools. There are many different negative psychological impacts of the IRSS on the individuals that survived the federal program. These people have, in their actual life, a hard time coping with the abuse and violence they have been put through during the ISSS. Survivors tend to reproduce violent relationships and to have a hard time raising their

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own children. They continue to struggle with their identity since they have been taught to hate themselves and their culture. Consequences are also noticeable on the Aboriginal communities where the intergenerational effects of devastation from land base, culture, families and Aboriginal language are still present. The Canadian government and the ecclesiastic authorities are the ones responsible for the IRSS. The Federal authorities, when creating the program, wanted to assimilate the Aboriginal people and make sure they were to fit into the lower echelons of society. The Church authorities were the ones in charge of the residential schools. Yet, even if the authorities achieved their main goal of assimilation, they did not respect the children and failed to protect the children from the abuse. Some measures have been put in place by the government to try and help the survivors and their descendants heal from the IRSS. However, Aboriginal people and communities, to heal, need to inform the rest of the Canadian population of what happened in the residential schools. Therefore, it can be said that the most important action that can be taken by Canadian individuals is to acknowledge what happened to the Aboriginal people during the IRSS. The individuals have been abused in isolation when the Canadian people were living a normal life. Aboriginal communities in order to get a normal life need the rest of the population to know what happened and to understand their background. Official apologies are a first step to the reconciliation between the First Nations and the Canadian population. Yet, how will the overall Aboriginal communities be able to cope with the effects of the IRSS that has been present for many generations? The precise steps to take are unclear, but essential for the redemption of actual and future generations.