

Residential Schools and Aboriginal Parenting: Voices of Parents

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One of the authors participated in a series of talking circles in a First Nation community in northern Canada in which Aboriginal adults explored their experiences with the child welfare system. As the participants shared their concerns about this system, the theme shifted over time to the effect that residential schools had on their parenting. We have taken this opportunity to share the written word of their voices. Their voices are interwoven with theory so that a greater understanding of present day issues will emerge. We are grateful to this community for speaking out about their experiences, their resentments and their struggles in order to understand how these experiences could happen to them and to their families. It is our hope that by telling on their stories through us, professionals who work with Aboriginal people will have a greater understanding of the Aboriginal families who come to them for help.

Sent Away

Between 1860 and early 1980s, the Aboriginal children of Canada were educated separately from Euro-Canadians in institutions referred to as residential schools. Residential schools were formally constituted as industrial schools and emphasized industrial training for young Canadian Aboriginal children. Regardless of what term was fashionable in the early period, the schools were founded for the purpose of boarding Aboriginal children in dormitories ten months of the year. Residential school became the accepted term in Canada, but in the United States the term boarding schools was used to describe similar institutions.

Aboriginal communities had no voices in this practice. One participant noted,

Our parents had to send us to the residential school. We were treated very badly right from the beginning. We were not given a choice to keep our kids. They had to be there. Kids had to be there at the mission in September otherwise you got in trouble. They just said, you have to have them at residential school at a certain age or else so

most of the parents took their kids there because they didn't want to get in trouble with the Indian Affairs.

Between the ages of three to age sixteen, the children were extracted from their homes, often forcibly, and placed in residential schools, where they remained from September until June each year. Unfortunately, some children did not return home. During this annual ten-month period they were separated from their parents and isolated from the rest of Aboriginal communities (McKenzie & Hudson, 1995, p.130).

The isolation from community and family life was revealed by the following person who reported,

I was two years old when I went into residential school. My mother died and my father couldn't take care of me. None of my relatives wanted a baby that little to take care of, so I was sent to residential school with my sisters. I basically grew up there. I stayed until I was sixteen. I would go home once in a while. I would stay home for the summer, or I would stay with other relations. That's the only time I learn about the Indian way of life, because nuns and priests raised me.

The destruction of Aboriginal families by putting young children in residential schools was encouraged from an early date by government legislators and enforced by representatives of churches and by federal government Indian agents. This practice removed the traditional role for childcare from the Aboriginal culture and turned it over to the government at these schools. The purposes behind this practice were not benign. The government's stated purpose of this policy was assimilation of the aboriginal people into the dominant society. The government believed that the only way to accomplish assimilation was by completely removing the children from the influence of their parents and communities (Tobias, 1983, p.48)

Thus, not only were Aboriginal children educated separately from the dominant society, they were also educated apart from their own culture. In these residential school settings, which were isolated culturally and geographically, the task of the residential school system was facilitated: that task was the systematic, formalized transmission of the dominant society's values, skills, culture, religion, and language. To ensure English language acquisition, speaking of any Aboriginal language was forbidden and enforced through corporal punishment. All aspects of the Aboriginal child's life were regulated and monitored from morning to night by their caretakers to ensure compliance. These caretakers were the missionaries,

priests and nuns of the Protestant and Catholic churches who, for the most part, administered the schools on behalf of the government.

The harshness of the routine and attempts at assimilation are revealed by the following report,

First thing in the morning, you had to jump out of bed and kneel on the cold floor to pray. It seems like we prayed a lot. We prayed, and then we got up and washed our faces. Then we went downstairs and went to church and prayed some more then went back and had breakfast. We prayed before breakfast we prayed after breakfast. We prayed before school – we prayed all day!

While MacDonald (1985) has suggested that “the causes of the widespread breakdown in Indian family life are complex,” (MacDonald, 1985,p.252). Aboriginal people were all affected in some way whether they attended these schools or not. Even those who never attended residential schools have relatives or friends who still feel the effects. Those who attended residential schools report that the residential experiences were extremely painful and avoid introspection of this highly emotionally burdensome and damaging experience. Others who did not attend are indirectly affected because they cannot understand why an educational experience should leave such bitter emotional scars.

This devastation is highlighted in the following comment,

Look at all these kids who have been taken away from the reserve. They don't even know where they come from. They don't know who their relations are of anything. There are a lot of them that come back and say this. They don't know anybody.

The practice of separating children from their parents and their way of life had a drastic impact on almost all Aboriginal families. The structural, cohesion and quality of family life suffered. Parenting skills diminished as succeeding generations became more and more institutionalized and experienced little nurturing. Low self-esteem and self-concept problems arose as children were taught that their own culture was inferior and uncivilized, even ‘savage’ (Martens, Daily & Hodgson, 1988). Extracting small children from their parents, and communities, and keeping them away from their influence, caused “parents and children to become strangers to each other” (Unger, 1977,p.16)

One person explained:

I think I saw the change with the residential school because that's where you were taken away from your parents when you were 5, 6 years old and you never saw them for the rest of the year until July and August and I think that's when the responsibility of the family looking after the children was taken away.

Extend Family and Parenting Skills

Parenting skills and child-rearing patterns are behaviours that are embedded and reflected differently in each culture. Moreover, the term parenting is problematic for Aboriginal cultures. For Euro-Canadians a parent is generally a father or a mother, and the parenting role includes child rearing. Conversely, in Aboriginal cultures several members of the extended family and the community are traditionally involved in child-rearing, in spheres of activity that, in Euro-Canadian society are parental. The broader term child rearing, is thus a better term to describe the behaviours that in Euro-Canadian culture come under the rubric of parenting, and the latter term may infer the more inclusive child-rearing patterns.

Traditionally, Aboriginal communities "were structured around the unique interrelationships that exist among family, extended family, clan, band, and tribe" (Lucus 1989, p.9). In addressing this unique family pattern, Lewis (1970) observed that, "the kinship structure, embodying a network of valued relationships, is one of the important keystones of the culture" (Lewis, 1970,p.16). The actual structure of Aboriginal societies included large extended families, and the child, highly valued, occupies a central place within it, (Fischler, 1985,p.95). The traditional Aboriginal family thus included maternal and paternal grandfathers, uncle's aunts, and cousins who all actively participated in child rearing (Cross, 1986, p.284).

The interference and disruption of traditional ways is articulately captured by this story,

I'm granny long ago, as afar as I know, and our people had their way of raising their families. Like we had the grandparents, we had the aunts and uncles and then we had the parents themselves. Our grandparents were there to teach us. They were our teachers. If we wanted to know something we approached our grandparents and they taught us what they knew and out aunts and uncles were the people that told us when we did something

wrong. When we did something wrong it wasn't our parents that scolded us or told us what we did was wrong. It was up to the aunts and uncles. They were the ones that disciplined their nephews' nieces and I still see that sometimes today. Sometimes one of my sons when his nephews do wrong, he tells them they did wrong. He doesn't wait for the parents to tell them. He tells them. That's the way it was long ago and the parents were there just to love their kids. You gave love to your kids and your kids loved you in return. That way when you didn't discipline them or give them heck for doing something wrong, there was never any resentment between the parents and the children.

Like sometimes nowadays maybe the parents tell their kids what they did was wrong maybe and then the child takes it the wrong way. They kind of figure my mother or dad doesn't love me. That's why they are treating me this way. That resentment grows. I think what our ancestors did I think was a good way because there was no resentment between the parents and the children, so the children didn't have to be taken out of homes and when they were orphaned or the parents were sick the rest of the family was there to just take them in and look after them. There was no such thing as who is going to take care of this child, some body just said you can come home and live with me. I'll raise you and take care of you and that was it. So I think behind all this was a love for the child, that's what it was. That way there was no resentment between the parents and the children but that's how I heard and I think that was a good way.

The sharing of child rearing by several persons was a traditional custom honoured and practiced by all North American Indian tribes (Redhorse, 1980, p.467). During periods of hunting and gathering, most nomadic tribes naturally assumed this standard of protecting children (Fischler, 1985, p. 96). Children were continually under the watchful eyes of tribal elders, siblings, cousins, aunts, or grandparents. As a result of the nurturing and security embedded in the extended family and community, the Aboriginal "child's self-concept is strongly tied to his family, clan, and tribe ... and bonds formed early within this structure" (Blanchard & Barsh, 1980, p.350). Furthermore, the extended "family structure provided support for families to live in a wholesome, non-threatening way" (Lucas, I ' 989,

p.9) because "child-rearing responsibilities were divided among many members of the community, and no single individual was overburdened with the care, discipline, or feeding of a child" (Cross, 1986, p. 284). Thus, the removal of Aboriginal children from parents to be raised in residential schools robbed these children of their rightful cultural legacy. The experience missed is the tightly knit community of extended family and relatives who shared involvement of child rearing by providing nurturing and security.

Modelling

"This practice of separating children from parents and the parenting role model is singularly responsible for many of the problems related to child care now found among Aboriginal parents" (McKenzie & Hudson, 1985, p.130). Haig-Brown (1988) emphasized the lack of available positive role models because "Children learn parenting skills by the way they are parented" (Haig-Brown, 1988, p. 111). Many Aboriginal children who spent ten years or more at residential schools, "had limited experience as family members" (Haig-Brown, 1988, p. 111). The limited exposure to family and community life took an enormous toll. One participant recalled:

And like you were saying about the schools and a lot of the Aboriginal convents down there (by Montreal), all those children if you check back and the ones that I know personally, all had problems in later life because they didn't have an example to follow. Their mother, father, aunts, uncles, they were just all like in a barn for a year and they went home for two months.

Atteneave (1977) recalls, "Neither they nor their own parents had ever known life in a family from the age they first entered school. Parents had no memories and no patterns to follow in rearing children except for the regimentation of mass sleeping and impersonal schedules"(p.30). This lack of positive role modeling, imposed on them through education processes at residential schools, culminated in many difficulties faced by the Aboriginal family in Canada today. When the family structure is weakened or destroyed, the culture and society cannot help but be affected.

The impact is readily apparent,

Being at residential school... parents of residential schools didn't have the parenting skills that they had like raising their own families at home.

Abrogating Parenting

By the 1960s, a generation of Aboriginal parents who were not permitted the choice of raising their children began to show signs of "abrogating their responsibility as parents" (Caldwell, 1979, p.21). Available research (Metcalf, 1975; Bergman, 1967) indicts that a pattern of expectation had developed among "some Indian parents that the residential school system provided a ... carefree way" (Caldwell, 1979, p.21) of living without children.

Haig-Brown (1988), in her book on the Kamloops Indian Residential School, wrote of a student who commented that: "The residential school took away the responsibility of the parents because the parents didn't see the kids all year" (p.111). *And that's when they lost respect for their parents.* This sentiment was echoed by the people we talked to.

Most children learn parenting skills without a great deal of conscious effort, and is done primarily by the way they were parented. However, institutional and Aboriginal child-rearing practices had little in common. As Agnes Grant (1996) observed, "Many parents who had been raised in the institutions did not have the parenting skills to raise their families, nor did they have the life skills to live their own lives successfully" (p.78). Students in residential schools, whose parents sometimes could not see them for months and even years at a stretch, had limited experience to draw from (Haig-Brown, 1998, p. 103).

When the children returned home, communities or tribes found their children changed in many ways, values being one such change. Furthermore, the children were confused. Instead of completely acquiring the values, skills, language, culture, and religion of the dominant society, the system injected conflicts between parents and children. In particular, over a period of time some children emerging from residential schools began to display the effects of their education as they assumed their role as parents. Some difficulties such as lack of confidence and lack of awareness in child rearing emerged (Ing, 1990).

These difficulties are revealed in the following stories,

- *It's what we lost but it's what they let us in the zoo when they gave us the drink. Because we didn't look after our kids, we would rather go and drink to the bars and buy our own liquor and everything. That's when we really lost it because we didn't know how to control it. Even I wanted to send my kids to a group home I remember that time. I wanted mine to go so I could have time to drink but they wouldn't take them because I don't know, I was a good parent.*
- *That was the time I wanted my children to be taken away so I could have more time to myself.*
- *I think after a while families got used to not having their children and they didn't take full responsibility and the bonding wasn't really there so that took a lot of responsibility from parents and they were used to not having their children. But that's why they're suffering because there's no bonding.*
- *We were talking about the residential school being a place for kids in need. Something was going on in their families so then the group home took over that role and some of the kids were put there because they were having some stuff going on, or their folks were moving around a lot for work or whatever which is also part of this history because, I remember in the old time too some of the people would be gone all the time trapping or whatever.*
- *You watch your mum and dad what they are doing and then you do it but if you are never there...*

Abuse

Problems did not stop at interfering with natural parent-child relationships. Aboriginal children were subjected to starvation, incarceration, physical and sexual abuse, and prolonged separation from families (BraveHeart, 1999, p.112). In one 1992 study, negative boarding school experiences were recounted by a majority of respondents and include physical abuse (58.1%), being punished for speaking their native tongue (37.9%), and sexual abuse by boarding school staff (22.6%) (BraveHeart-Jordan, 1995).

The devastating effects of residential school abuse was echoed by the people who spoke,

I've heard some of those stories from older men. How they were treated. And one example was like when they went to bed or something, they were yanked out of bed in the middle of the night and dipped into ice cold water and forced to stand in the corner bare naked in front of everybody like for a day and it was just horrible. These older fellow was telling me that it happened to him. I think he was at an Alberta mission and he said he ran into one of the nuns who used to teach in there. She was in the old folks home in Northern Alberta. This was years and years later. He was already in his 50s by then and this nun saw him come into the old folks home and she said, oh, my son and she was trying to be all sweet and nice and thought he would be happy to see her and he said he looked at her and he just froze and she came up to him and he said he slapped her face. He couldn't help himself. He had all that hate and anger in him for so many years he just couldn't control it. It's just awful things to cause a person to do that to a nun.

Similarly, another individual reported, *when he was a little boy in the convent he was raped every night. As a result of that how would you expect that man to even be a good father he'd have so much hate.*

The legacy was parents who are bitter, transmitting their own bitterness to their children. "This vicious cycle has to stop" (Assembly of First Nations, 1989). The current generation of young Aboriginal people is the first generation that did not attend residential schools. Nevertheless because their parents and grandparents attended residential schools, they are deeply affected by the wounds and bitter, memories of early childhood experiences. Three generations of ripping apart Aboriginal families have severely undermined the role of the extended family and kinship networks, causing these kinship networks to break down, or in most cases, to be destroyed (Ing, 1990). One person attributed the -destruction to, *It's like you had to give up your will to survive I guess.*

Clinical and research experience among one tribe (Lakota) reveal that Aboriginal parents who were themselves raised in boarding school settings feel inadequate and overwhelmed in their parental role. Further, descendants of boarding school attendees also report a history of neglect and abuse in their own childhoods accompanied by feelings of inadequacy as parents and confusion about how to raise children in a healthy way. This

historical trauma has resulted in impairment in culturally normative parenting styles and high risk factors for developing alcohol and/or other drug abuse associated with ineffective and injurious parenting (Brave Heart, 1999, p. 112-113).

The legacy of the learning has remained, but has been turned around, as explained by this participant.

The children are learning to be affectionate now. Now it is but then another party steps in and now you can't discipline or correct your children. When you do you get another form of abuse now. They call it abuse. And it isn't abuse when you are trying to discipline your children and some of the children they take advantage of it. They turn it around to their own advantage and then they admit not knowing that it is discipline. Like at one time it was o.k. to physically punish children and now the law says it's wrong.

Discipline and Punishment

Before the residential school era, the use of physical discipline was uncommon in most tribes (Horejsi, Heavy Runner & Pablo, 1992, p.334). The residential schools not only destroyed or distorted the intergenerational (cultural) transmission of family and parenting knowledge and behaviour, but they also introduced new and dysfunctional behaviours, such as the use of severe punishment in child rearing. Parents who had, as children, been spanked and hit while attending residential school responded similarly to their own children.

In the dormitory, there were three rows of beds. There were 45-50 girls, and two nuns would sleep in the corner, with the curtain drawn their beds, one at one end and one at the other end. You'd go to sleep, and then they'd be walking around. It was just like a jail, a penitentiary. That's what it was like, when they took us from our parents and put us in there, like we did something wrong. Everybody was crying, little kids crying because they didn't want to stay there. They'd get so lonesome.

When the children were not being disciplined, they lived in fear of it, we lived in such fear. *Fear of punishment.*

The harshness of the discipline was traumatic;

It was the punishment that was really bad. They punished for everything: when you were lined up, you couldn't talk. In church, you couldn't sleep--I used to fall asleep all the time in church. The service would go and on... If I wasn't waving at my boyfriend, I was falling asleep. Church used to be in Latin, and we didn't understand Latin. We were made to go to church, even if you were sick you were still made to go sometimes. Some people would faint in church, and they would just take them out--it would add a bit of excitement, anyway.

Discipline in these schools was harsh and the daily routine rigid. Children were required to speak only English and were punished for using their Aboriginal language. Their hair, an important cultural symbol, was cropped. Uniforms were imposed and replaced individually created and uniquely decorated Aboriginal clothes. Visits home were few and far between. Clearly, residential schools intentionally destroyed cultural identity; unfortunately, it was quite successful. Many who attended these schools lost touch with their tribal language, religious beliefs, customs, and social norms (Horejsi, Heavy Runner & Pablo, 1992).

So everything was controlled what you spoke, they controlled. They controlled our religion. The nuns taught us what was good and what was evil the dances and feasts were evil we were worshipping a different God. There's only one God, but they invented another one, I guess, for us.

The experiences generated confusion and turmoil in the lives of the children,

And even when we used to go home for the summer like the older folks, my dad, they used to do that in the Indian way. They used to send us to bed so we don't know anything because they're scared they're coming to hell over here. So that's why I don't know anything. Because if I told on them well sometimes when you are kid

without meaning to and the cops would come over here so they didn't tell us anything.

Corporal punishment was associated with the speaking of the Aboriginal language. This form of discipline was devastating to the pupils. However, many Aboriginal parents raised in the residential school system resorted to using punitive discipline with their offspring. This is understandable because, as Hull (1982) stated, the use of this "punitive discipline is the result of harsh treatment modeled for them as children by the staff" (p.344) at residential schools.

Showing Affection

Before residential schools, in Aboriginal families, a general loving attitude toward all children prevailed, not just for one's own children, but love for all the children of the tribe. An orphan or an adopted child was not in any way mistreated or set apart by the family, but was gratefully taken in and cherished. Aboriginal people have been noted to accord unquestioned acceptance of, and respect for, all individuals, irrespective of age or sex, not only for their abilities but also with considerable tolerance as well for their weaknesses (Bull, 1991). The aftermath of forced assimilation through the residential school experience changed it all.

The following comments reflect issues around affection,

- *We were taken away from our mothers, and the bonding was taken away from our parents. We were taken away, that's why we don't hug.*
- *The nuns were so mean to little kids, when they should have just loved them, but they didn't. I remember when my mother died, they didn't comfort me.*
- *If you go and hug someone, you can just feel the tenseness, we hardly ever had that, and that began from the residential school, I think, because we never loved on another that way.*
- *I'm not affectionate, eh. I'm not. Well I love my kids and everything but that's my parents but I'm not affectionate to go and hug or whatever.*
- *We weren't allowed to do that in the mission or even hold hands; even with your best friend you couldn't do that. It was a sin.*

- *I love my kids but I'm not... You can't even say it because it wasn't said to you. Love was a forbidden word and it's such a beautiful word today but it was not said to us.*
- *The one we were supposed to love was God but it seems like it's the wrong word.*
- *And also we were when separated. The only times we were with the boys or anything like that was in school and even in school we were separated. Like the girls would sit in front and the boys would sit in the back. We were always separated. It seems like there was no bonding. You were alone in the convent and the first time when I started school was only 3 times, like you go home for a day at Christmas and New Year's I think and just the summer.*

The disruption of family life and parent-child relationships continues to this day,

- *They (our children) don't realize how hard we had it and they think we are just neglecting them. We just don't know how to show our affection to them. We don't know how and that's hard.*
- *I feel the need to teach the young people today, they don't understand the love that we have for them and I think that they need to know that we love them, our children because they have been affected by us not knowing how to show our love for them and today's society to show our love is buying them something and that's not really what they need. They need the hugs and to hear that we love them because we don't know how. As soon as you try to hug somebody well you feel bad, because our parents did not show it to us because they were not there and it makes children think that they are not loved but they are but it's us that don't know how to show it. We need to put that love back. I helped my daughter with a group of people about 3 or 4 days ago and one of my nieces asked me what kind of soup it was and I said love soup. I made it with love. And you should have seen the people that we had in there who needed that soup, I need that love but people are crying for it and little things like that makes a person happy. We were just amazed with the people that wanted the love. You'd think that they didn't but they do. We didn't think they were up there, they have a job and all that and the love that they want. The young of today should know that they are*

loved. Well doing anything for our children so they have to hear that, from the elders, from their parents, and I think that's one thing we should do first of all. The parents are suffering too because they were raised without the love that they should have had and that's what took us away and that's a negative and sometimes it hurts me because that's the thing that every human being needs and they don't know how. I think sometimes we feel that if we tell them that they might say well, what are you talking about. You never showed it. You are afraid of that. You feel that still in there and that's one thing that the convent took away from us. They were never parents and they never gave birth to a kid.

- *It's very interesting and we survived before, we didn't have the dollar. We had love. We had respect for our elders and love from our children because we showed them love. They didn't just send them away to school They learned lots at home instead of being sent some place else to learn from somebody else and I think that's why our kids don't in a way respect us because we just sent them away somewhere else to learn all them other things besides love and respect.*

Oral Tradition

Added to the breakdown of the extended family and kinship systems, the confusion created by the residential schools' indoctrination undermined the role of elders passing down traditions. The ban on speaking Aboriginal languages interfered with this "passing down" process.

By going into the residential school, I missed knowing my mother. I missed learning how to talk Cree. I never really learned how to talk Cree. I was raised there, and they made us shut up every time we tried to talk Cree. I would have loved to spend more time with the grandfathers and grandmothers. We never went to visit them after our mother died--we never saw them after that.

Prohibiting the use of Aboriginal languages at every residential school and enforcing this prohibition by the threat of corporal punishment discouraged the speaking of the mother tongue. The isolation of young children, both culturally and geographically for a period of ten months a year for most of their middle childhood years, diminished the opportunity

for Aboriginal children to gain a respect for their elders, their language, and their culture, and to feel a sense of pride in their unique Aboriginal selves.

Today child-rearing patterns among Aboriginal people have been severely affected and modified. In the process, presumably, the children's self-esteem has been damaged and communication between generations eroded through language loss. Values, beliefs, and customs were not systematically taught to subsequent generations.

There is a consensus that due to residential school education, the current generation of elders and others who survived the residential school system suffered traumatic losses in the areas of self-esteem, parenting skills, and language: that those losses are both psychological and cultural; and that, consequently, those traumatic experiences will be transmitted in some form to the next generations (Ing, 1990).

- *The government spoilt everything. Maybe that's why the Aboriginal people stopped having these stories because they weren't in control of their people any more. The government just kept saying this is true, this is false.*
- *Our old people always told us how to look after our kids, to take good care of our kids to raise them right because they didn't belong to us and they were loaned to us by the Creator. He gave us these children to raise for Him and if we think of that all the time we will see that we try to raise our kids right because they are His and you don't realize that until you know I lost my boy a couple of months ago. In a way I thank my Creator for giving me so many years of his life and that kind of healed me.*

Many Aboriginal people who left the residential school system feared to speak their mother tongue and so failed to teach the language and traditional ways to their children. Of this fear to speak the language, one author noted, "as adults many consciously did not teach their children a Aboriginal language so that they might avoid the punishments incurred through its use at school" (Haig-Brown, 1988, p 110).

One of the tragedies of this fear of speaking one's Aboriginal language is the failure to take advantage of what a culture offers to help ease the hardship of parenting. Traditionally, an intricate network of relatives could be depended on to help in child rearing. Now there has been a disruption to traditional and cultural child-rearing patterns. Near loss or loss of language and the fear of speaking has affected these belief systems and child-rearing values.

As a Aboriginal nation and Canadians we should be proud who we are and teach our children to know who they are and I think once they know that who they are and identify themselves as who they are I think they will make progress and they will be proud of themselves and they wouldn't be so much low self esteem because before the white man came we survived. There were so many things that we need to teach our children to be proud of who they are and to identify themselves as Aboriginal people so they can be proud people.

Cross-agrees, observing "Belief systems in child-rearing patterns and values were passed from one generation to the next orally" (Cross, 1986, p.285). The oral tradition was a significant aspect of Aboriginal culture in regard to children. Cross (1986) attributes the practice of prohibiting the use of Aboriginal languages in residential schools to reducing "the strength of the oral tradition and consequently weakened the children's connection with their culture. Traditional child-rearing practices and attitudes were thus forgotten" (p.286) or were considered inferior by some of the returning pupils from the schools.

Advice from one another is something we should all share in a community and this goes well with our raising of our children, our grandchildren, whoever the child maybe.

Dakota Elder Eva McKay of Sioux Valley states, "It's true that the residential school life has altered the traditional way of our people and was the beginning of the breaking up of traditional family life. We came out confused ... and the hurt that we did not bring out but hid within us became a reality later in life" (Assembly of First Nations, 1989).

Positives Aspect About Residential Schooling

An encouraging phenomenon is that some Aboriginal children managed to survive the experiences and some even emerged relatively unscarred by it. For example, Johnston (1988). Commenting proudly on his graduation from the residential school he attended writes, "We toughed it out, didn't we? They couldn't break us down" (Johnston, 1988, p.243).

Some of the positive mentioned follow, with a theme that seems to be that of resiliency,

- *All the positive is that I am taking care of myself. I am going to counselling for this low self-esteem and guilty feelings.*

Even when I went to this counselling training this past week, I felt that I was a big dummy (in front) of all those people that had degrees and everything. When I see my children I still feel guilty.

- *And one positive from residential school I don't know. Strength.*
- *And it's because of the way I was brought up and the people that's around me that's who makes me who I am and anything I've done in the past was because of ----- that had been victimized because of residential schools and social services. I think where residential schools left off, that's where welfare took over because welfare is kind of trying to patch up with what they did to people but it's still not really working because there's a lot of people paying for it.*
- *Well honestly I can't think of anything positive at all. We're all still here. I guess that's positive but other than that. I still feel the effects and I'm still really angry so I can't see anything positive.*
- *For me it was more positive than negative because I had a different experience as being an orphan. During the school year we treated the same as the other ones. The same thing happened but during the summer months it was more like a home, how you would be treated at home.*
- *So there's some positives that's been coming out for me and one of the things is the resiliency of that person that I am and basically a lot of inner strength and perseverance I guess and re-learning restoring my story about how it is I'm going to carry on in my life.*

Miller (1996, p. 430) points to "the astonishingly high proportion of the male leadership of Native political organizations, especially from the 1940s until the 1980s, was the product of residential schools." Despite the lack of a gender analysis, there is a long list of male leaders-Andrew Paul, James Gladstone, John Totoosis, Phil Fontaine and Mathew Coon Come.

- *We have to be able to trust one another because I tell you we will never survive and as long as we're not healed, how*

can we expect our... we say our generation is our children. Well they're just stuck because we're stuck.

- *You know this residential school where we lost identity so forth and so on, now that we are in the modern era and the children still are losing their freedom towards welfare.*

Summary

Beginning in the late 1800s, both Canadian and U.S. federal government policy toward Aboriginal American people emphasized forced assimilation into the world of the white man. The residential or Indian boarding school was designed to remove children from the influence of their parents and tribes and create a new social environment where they would be "civilized" (Horejsi, Heavy Runner & Pablo, 1992, p.333). The system of church-state run residential schools for Aboriginals was the central element in the movement's policy of forced assimilation and its legacy has been the most damaging to Aboriginal individuals, families, communities, and cultures (Trevithick, 1998, p. 51).

The residential school experience has had a far-reaching effect on Aboriginal culture and family structure. Those who spent much of their childhood in residential schools were deprived of valuable opportunities to experience family life, and many reached their adulthood with no clear concept of parenting behaviour and traditional family functioning. The residential school effectively destroyed the intergenerational transmission of family and parenting knowledge and behaviours. Now, one or more generations after the residential school era, many Aboriginal people are ill prepared for the parent role.

Furthermore, the residential schools also disrupted the oral cultural transmission of parent-child attachment behaviours, which has created personal and family problems that have persisted over as many as three generations. As a sad after effect of these disruptions, many Aboriginal children are being raised by biological parents with few parenting skills; some children are being raised by grandparents who lack real attachment to their own children-the parents of their grandchildren (Horejsi, Heavy Runner & Pablo, 1992, p.334). The lack of parenting skills and the problems in attachment place children at risk of abuse or neglect. Unless these problems are dealt with, each new generation is at risk of repeating this dysfunctional cycle.

Most of all, I missed my childhood years, no doubt about it. Being with our mother and father, being together as a family. We had no family life together. We didn't really know our relative, not until much later. But we're together now.

Postscript

Finally, lest those of us who are involved with Aboriginal people today risk becoming overly complacent, it behooves us to reflect upon the ways in which current child welfare systems may be inadvertently replicating oppressive practices upon Aboriginal people. In one talking circle, a highly respected professional member of the community who had practiced child welfare work spontaneously exclaimed in response to the stories "Oh my God, I became the Indian Agent for my people!"

It seems clear that many Aboriginal communities continue to lose inordinate numbers of their children to child welfare systems to this day. While such systems clearly disavow the historical government objective to remove Aboriginal children from the influence of their families and communities, one must question if by failing to respect Aboriginal culture and traditions or by not ensuring an ongoing intimate relationship with extended families, we may not end up by perpetuating another generation of children who will have failed to learn how to parent and how to show love. As helping professionals who have replaced the Indian Agent, the Priest and the Police who enforced the removal of these children to the Residential Schools, we may be able to avoid inadvertently repeating the same patterns and thereby improve the outcomes for aboriginal families and communities by learning from their stories.

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