

Can Society Educate Toward Reconciliation? Telling the Untold Story

Abstract

Educating society about how Residential Schools traumatized the Aboriginal people is a crucial step in continuing the healing process. Reconciliation needs to extend beyond apology. An apology without a transformation of attitude is merely empty words. More must be done to educate about Aboriginal history at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels, which will hopefully lead to a society with empathy toward Indigenous issues. Until people understand the horrors that Aboriginal children and their families endured at the Residential Schools, they may not comprehend the reason for the pursuit of reconciliation. Although the current BC Curriculum contains aspects of Indigenous connections, schools should incorporate more about the actual happenings within these confines, instead of merely acknowledging their existence. In the final section of this paper, I will provide an example of an elementary level activity that would heighten students' understanding of the life of an Aboriginal child taken to a residential school.

Perhaps the foremost issue of understanding the effect of residential schools is the misunderstanding of the word reconciliation. According to Sandlane Gid, what is needed first is "a process of conciliation" (Sterritt, 2019). She has issues with the meaning of reconciliation, "Reconciliation means that you had a good relationship to

begin with and then you're reconciling the relationship, in particular with the Canadian government" (Sterritt, 2019). Gid makes a valid point and indicates that uttering a hollow apology to the First Peoples is only the beginning of their road to healing. Joanne Mills, the executive director of the Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre in Surrey, British Columbia, states that "Reconciliation in Canada is more about the acknowledgment that there were wrongs, but there isn't a lot of action attached to it" (Sterritt, 2019). Her statement strikes a critical point; the misconception of reconciliation has created a negative impact on the Indigenous population of Canada. How can we put something back to the way it was, when that "something" was never desirable in the first place? The answer is to educate Canadians and tell a story not yet entirely told; to reveal the profound truth about Aboriginal History in Canada from their perspective. Only then can a conciliation between the Canadian Government and the First Peoples be attained.

By teaching Canadian students about the events which occurred before, and during the era of, Residential Schools in Canada, society might shed its ignorance on the subject. Michael Apple (2014) states that "Educational institutions are not apart from society. They are *central* elements of society...as places that make particular knowledge and culture legitimate" (p. 158). If Canadian students enter society as adults without proper knowledge of what Residential Schools entailed, it places limits on comprehending the Indigenous peoples' stories. All children must go to school, so what better place to make known the truth about Canada's role in victimizing Aboriginal children? It is the Canadian Government's responsibility to educate young people about this history and the steps being taken to rectify the situation.

Interestingly, *Educational Foundations in Canada* contains only a vague section on residential school education, in which they “do not tell it [the story] here” but instead “note the parallels to the Canadian experience and...point our readers to a couple of excellent resources” (Edmunds et al., 2015, p. 194). While the article recognizes that residential schools promoted “cultural eradication” (Edmunds et al., 2015, p 194), little is written regarding the details of these events; the story remained hidden. Unfortunately, the residential school story is a part of Canadian education history and demands more than superficial recognition.

Reading the Canadian Government's 2007 apology is not enough. It does not reveal history from the Aboriginal perspective. Stephen Harper begins the apology with “I stand before you today to offer an apology to former students of Indian residential schools. The treatment of children in these schools is a sad chapter in our history” (Parrott, 2015). The new BC Curriculum now includes aspects of Aboriginal history in Canada. Yet, there needs to be more information that enlightens students with stories from actual survivors of these schools so that they can read first-hand the real effects of the residential school tragedy. According to Hopkins (2013), “Challenging coloniality within educational spaces entails situating Indigenous issues and concerns in the foreground of the discourse, such as the aim to revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures. (p. 242). Young people hold power to encourage society about the importance of Indigenous rights in Canada. After all, this unceded territory was initially theirs

To inform students about Residential Schools, teachers need to move them beyond the concrete and into abstract thinking on the topic. Even at a young age, children need to discover the truth, because concerning this section of Canadian history, many "never knew any of this" (Stewart 2017). But how can teachers instill the seriousness of this topic on students and have them think critically about what happened? They need to implement lessons and activities that encourage students to view Aboriginal history from an Indigenous perspective. Canadian school districts need to collaborate with the government and Aboriginal groups to attain resources in the form of a story (either by film or Elder) told from the viewpoint of those who suffered at the hand of the Residential School tragedy. Stewart (2017) feels that "once children in Canada, not just young children but also the critical age of the teenagers and the early university grouping, know that history, I think it will be very significant in terms of changing Canada for the better" (par. 5).

If teachers are to educate their students about the untold truths of Residential Schools, how can they make the story relatable? Educational institutions are a perfect location to prime young people as respectful citizens. According to Stewart (2017), "Schools seem to us to be one of the best vehicles to create and sustain a change in the attitude of all Canadians to the nature of the relationship that must exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country" (par. 13). Students need to deviate from the past practice of merely reading about historical events on a superficial level. They need to think critically about the consequences of events that occurred within this past. While not all school districts can visit a Residential School like we can

in Kamloops, effort should be made to make students aware of what a typical day entailed in these institutions, which should involve more than merely acknowledging these places existed. Teachers should obtain videos and request visits from elders to speak with their class about the schools. The Truth and Reconciliation Canada website contain authentic resources, including stories from actual residential school survivors. The link to the website is provided in the works consulted section of this paper. Below is a simple outline of a potential lesson outline regarding Residential School awareness (intermediate grades four through seven).

Arrange an Elder visit or acquire a valid documentary video about Residential Schools (This form of story will be more powerful and effective than simply reading from a book)

Class Discussion: following visit or video (encourage questions)

Some questions to ask students:

- How is this different from your school?
- How are these teachers different from yours?
- Do you think these children miss their parents?
- Have you ever been away from home without your parents?
- Have you ever been forbidden to talk about something important to you?

Journal Activity:

Imagine you are an Aboriginal student at a residential school. Choose from the following:

1. Write about your typical day at the school
2. Write a letter home to your parents

Some considerations for this lesson:

- If there are Indigenous students in the class, they may not want to participate in this activity. Contact the parents in advance of the event. Perhaps the parents would know of someone who could come in and speak to the class about this topic. This would make a good community connection!
- Students may draw a picture as an alternative to writing (Differentiated Instruction)

- Younger students may be frightened at the severity of the topic. The teacher should consider how the class will respond and adjust the lesson accordingly.

Lesson Close:

Have students share some of their journal ideas with the class. Ask if the activity has made them more aware of what happened in the Residential Schools.

Extension: Students could perform a re-enactment skit of a day or scene in a residential school and present it to the class.

***Make sure to choose resources carefully, and complete the activity with respect. The teacher should contact the Secwepemc Museum in Kamloops (or other area) for accurate resources on the topic.*

Conclusion:

In summary, education is the dominant factor in the healing process for the Residential School trauma of Canadian history. As Stewart (2017) states, "Education and reconciliation go hand in hand (par. 14). However, it is essential to note that there never was a consistently positive relationship between the early settlers and the Aboriginal people, and the healing process involves more of a conciliatory approach. To educate Canadians, we must tell the relationship history from an Aboriginal viewpoint. The untold story must be told. It is only when Canadians understand the happenings within the residential schools that they will be able to have empathy for the residual trauma that lingers within First Nations communities. The Canadian Government must collaborate with Aboriginal groups and teachers to develop a unique curricular component that addresses Residential Schools. When we discuss this unfortunate detail of Canadian history in our schools, it will help the healing process. Truth needs to be told before conciliation, or reconciliation, can occur.

Works Cited

Apple, Michael. (2014). "Can Education Change Society?" Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, New York and London, 151-170.

Edmunds, A. L., Badley, K., & Nickel, J. (2015). "The History of Education." Chapter 5 in *Educational foundations in Canada*. Oxford University Press, 194-195.

Hopkins, John. (2013). "Justice and American Indian Education: A Reconciliation Approach." *Philosophy of Education*. Philosophy of Education Society. Urbana, Illinois, 236-245.

Parrott, Zach. (2015, April 24). Government Apology to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools. Retrieved from:
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/government-apology-to-former-students-of-indian-residential-schools>

Stewart, J.D.M., (2014, March 31, updated 2017). Education is the Best Path to Reconciliation on Residential Schools. Retrieved from:
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/education-is-the-best-path-to-reconciliation-on-residential-schools/article17735219/>

Sterritt, Angela. (2019, January 3). What does reconciliation mean to Indigenous people? Retrieved from:
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/reconciliation-doesn-t-exist-yet-say-indigenous-leaders-1.4963594>

Works Consulted

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://moodle.tru.ca/mod/resource/view.php?id=877342>