

# RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

## Busting myths and misconceptions



## \*TRIGGER WARNING

# Honesty & Truth

There are many misconceptions about residential schools. Some common rebuttals that you hear about residential schools when people are confronted about Canada's colonialism are:

- "That all happened in the past."
- "The government had good intentions."
- "No one knew what the conditions were at the time."
- "Hardly anyone even attended these schools."
- "Indigenous people never resisted these schools."

These common rebuttals **are not true and are harmful** to Indigenous people. In this unit, we are going to be looking at residential schools through the lens of Indigenous resistance and resilience. We are going to bust some of these harmful myths. We are going to learn about a number of different colonial policies that impacted Indigenous people, as well as how strong and resilient Indigenous people were, and still are, to these policies and treatment.

# I Lost My Talk

I lost my talk  
The talk you took away  
When I was a little girl  
At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away:  
I speak like you  
I think like you  
I create like you

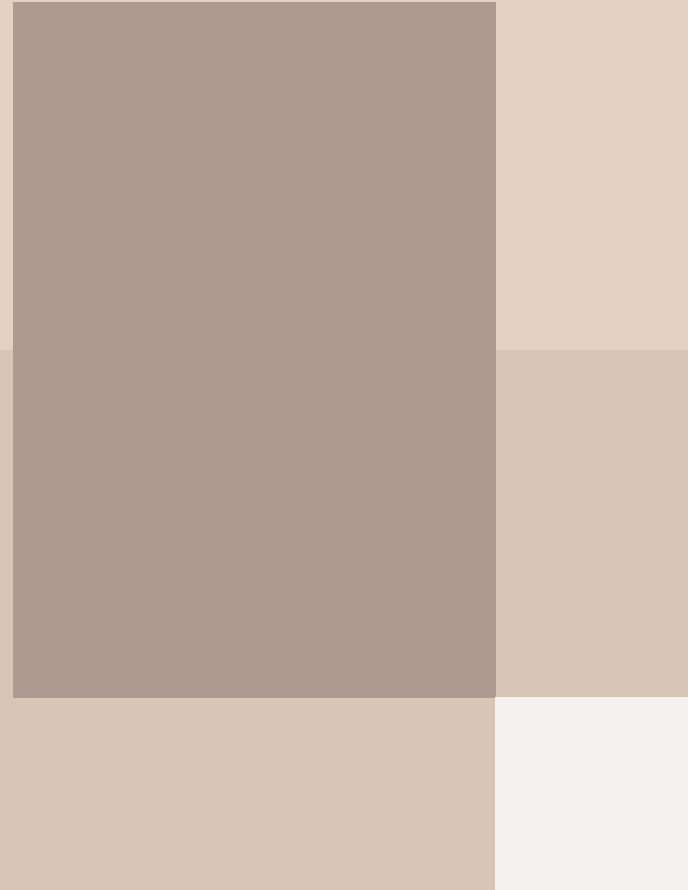
The scrambled ballad, about my world

Two ways I talk  
Both ways I say,  
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,  
Let me find my talk  
So I can teach you about me.

# “That all happened in the past”

The first rebuttal we are going to talk about is the idea that Indigenous people should “just get over it” and stop dwelling on the past and get on with their lives.



There are approximately 75, 000 former students alive today. Residential schools were in operation well into the last quarter of the 20th century. Gordon Residential School in Saskatchewan did not close until 1996. The abuses did **not** only happen a long time ago. Furthermore, the residential school introduced destructive policies to Indigenous communities which have been passed on from generation to generation -- these are spoken of collectively as the intergenerational legacy of the residential school system. The consequences of policy and forced assimilation are very much alive in Indigenous communities.



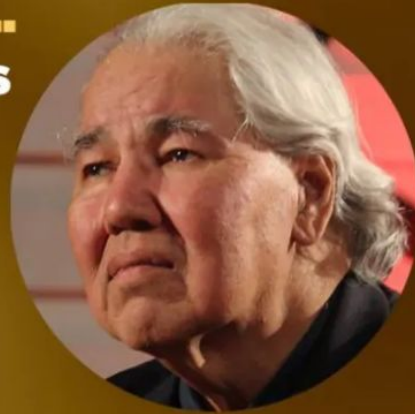
A group of female students and a nun pose in a classroom at Cross Lake Indian Residential School in Cross Lake, Man., in a February 1940 archive photo. (Library and Archives Canada)

Read Chelsea Vowel's blog post:

**“We Can't Get Anywhere Until We Flip the Narrative”**

**We should never forget ...  
it's part of who we are as  
a nation.**

**And this nation  
must never forget  
what it once did to its  
most vulnerable people.**



- Senator Murray Sinclair

# “The government had good intentions.”

Another misconception about residential schools is that the government had good intentions. Some people say that everyone believed at the time that assimilation was a good policy.



## HONESTY & TRUTH

The system itself was designed to “educate and colonize a people against their will” (McKay). The policy of forced assimilation and residential schools had many Indigenous and non-Indigenous critics, but in each case the critics were silenced. A good example is the missionary E.F. Wilson, who came into conflict with the church over his criticism of forced assimilation and his promotion of Indigenous cultures, languages, and political autonomy. Another example is on the next slide...



One of the common misconceptions about the residential school system is that the government had good intentions and wanted to provide a quality education to make Indigenous peoples successful in a new, emerging economy.

However, many survivor accounts explain how the residential school system relied on students being overworked rather than academics:

**“This labour was essential to the housing, clothing, and feeding of the students. Without their work, the system would have collapsed”** (p. 332 of the TRC).

Some of the work Indigenous students did: working in the trades (carpentry), producing goods (aprons, coats, dresses, mattresses, napkins, pillows, trousers, etc.), cleaning, farming (provided low-cost food source for the students). While there are some examples of Indigenous students being provided with work, there is an alarming amount of accounts that discuss the conditions of overworking students.

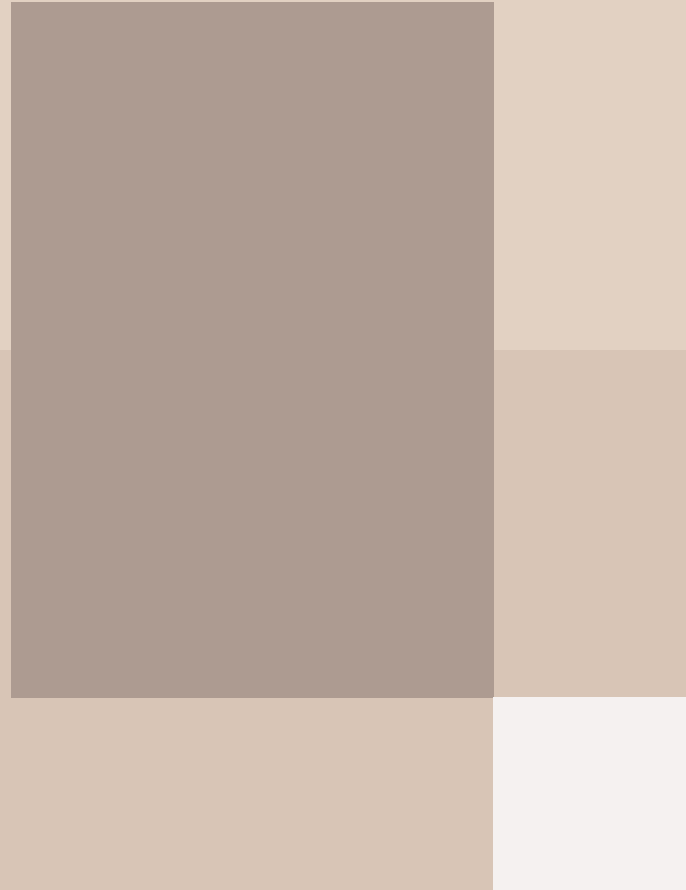
Principal Walter McLaren in Birtle, Manitoba:

“The children are made a means to the end. The Indians perceive this and the demand for day schools is growing as a result. They see too often the interests of their children’s English education are sacrificed because the children are useful to relieve the situation about the school or farm. I know boys and girls who after ten years in our schools ... cannot read beyond the second reader, cannot write a decent letter” (p. 341 of the TRC).

**[CLICK HERE](#) TO ACCESS “THE STUDENT AS LABOURER” CHAPTER  
FORM THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION.**

“No one knew what the conditions were at the time”

This is another common myth people say about residential schools.



There is ample evidence that the church and government worked together to keep known abuses from public view. Their efforts, however, failed. As early as 1920, Canadians could read published reports of the conditions in the residential school. These conditions included inadequate nutrition, inadequate health standards, and inadequate staff training. P.H. Bryce, a government inspector of the schools, concluded that the system was a “national crime.” Even by the standards of the day, the system was appalling.



Anglican Church Archives, Old Sun



[Click here](#) to listen to the podcast clip to hear about how Dr. Peter Bryce spoke out about residential schools and was silenced.

(There are questions about this segment on your handout)

[Here is an article](#) that has good information about Peter Bryce too.

“Not many children attended the schools.”

Another misconception about residential schools is that not many people attended them. This rebuttal is used to dismiss the impacts residential schools had on Indigenous people and communities.



Over the period of 1800 - 1990, over 130 residential (boarding, industrial) schools had existed at one time or another. The number of active schools peaked at 80 in 1931. In the early 1900s, about 1/6 of children between 6 and 15 attended these schools. Geoffrey York reports that by the 1940s, about 8000 Indigenous children -- half the Indigenous population -- were enrolled at 76 residential schools across the country.

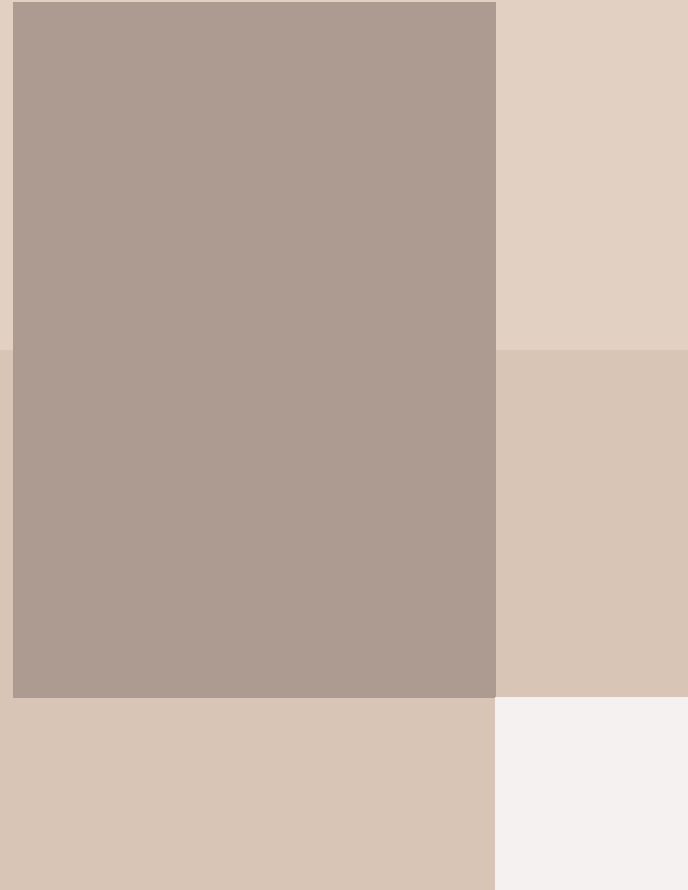
However, these are national averages. In some regions -- the North, B.C. and the Prairies for example -- had higher percentages. There are communities which had all their children forcibly removed. The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba -- which characterized the residential school system as “ a conscious, deliberate, and often brutal attempt to force Aboriginal people to assimilate” -- noted that “for the first time in over 100 years, many families are experiencing a generation of children who live with their parents until their teens.”

In any case, the consequences of the system are not adequately captured by statistics, nor did the school system operate in isolation. Residential schools constituted one piece of a larger policy puzzle. Where the residential school system left off - in the effort to solve the “Indian Problem” -- the Indian Act and Child Welfare, Reservation, and Justice systems took over. It is these larger relationships and systems where forced assimilation policy informs them.



# “Indigenous people never resisted these schools.”

This is another common myth that people say, but it could not be further from the truth. There are many accounts of parents and children resisting the residential school system.



[This website](#) lists some examples of resistance to residential schools.

It is important we do not tell history in a way that suggests Indigenous peoples passively accepted assimilation policies and practices. Indigenous peoples have always been strong, resistant, and resilient to assimilation policies and mistreatment.



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[Click here](#) and access the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Chapter that details the resistance Indigenous peoples demonstrated.

*Aboriginal parents and communities **never ceased to speak out and act** on behalf of their children. This resistance took numerous forms.*

When they buried the children  
What they didn't know  
They were lovingly embraced  
By the land  
Held and cradled in a mother's heart  
The trees wept for them, with the wind  
they sang mourning songs their mother's  
didn't know to sing  
bending branches to touch the earth  
around them. The Creator cried for them  
the tears falling like rain.

Mother Earth held them  
until they could be found.  
Now our voices sing the mourning songs.  
with the trees. the wind. light sacred fire  
ensure they are never forgotten as we sing  
JUSTICE

-abigail echo-hawk

[Click here](#) to access your assignment.

# Your Assignment