

Summary: This selection explains how residential schools impacted First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in the past, and continues to impact Indigenous families across Canada today.

Reading Level: 🍷 🍷 🍷

Vocabulary: residential schools, Canadian government, forced, uniform, strict, culture, Survivor, Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Minds on Reflection (Before Reading): What purpose should schooling and education serve? Should it be good for all children?

Understanding the Page:

1 On page 30, we learn that in some residential schools children were forced to cut their hair, were called a strange name, or worse yet, just a number. How do you think these actions made the children feel? What do you think was the purpose of these actions?

2 On page 31, we learn that when children were taken from their homes to go to residential schools, the whole circle of life was broken. What do you think the author, Lisa Charleyboy, means by “circle of life”? What circle is broken? Consider how children grow up and learn from their families and communities in your answer.

3 Because children were removed from their families and communities for long periods of time, these children also went without learning what it was like to have a loving parent because they never had that opportunity at school. What effect do you think this had when they raised their own children?

4 On page 31, we learn that many Indigenous languages are threatened as a result of residential schools. Why are some Indigenous languages disappearing today? Why are Elders and Knowledge Keepers important to the survival of Indigenous languages?



Health — What is required for a child to be healthy? Based on what you have learned about residential schools, do you think that residential schools allowed Indigenous children to be healthy? Provide specific examples for why or why not to explain your thinking.



Social Studies — What role do families have in a community? Revisit the quote on page 2 by Elder Vital Daniels, when thinking about your answer: “Family is what keeps us happy! Being together, helping one another out is what family is all about.” What are the different parts that can make up a family? How do the various parts of a family work to transmit culture? How did residential schools disrupt Indigenous families? What impact do you think this had on Indigenous communities?



Social Studies — On page 30, we learn that the first residential schools were run by churches where Indigenous children had to take part in church activities that were strange to them. What is the purpose of spiritual practices? Who should teach spiritual practices to children? What impact do you think learning spiritual practices that were so different from their own spiritual practices had on Indigenous children?

Far From Home

by Lisa Charleyboy

Not many kids can imagine living apart from their parents for a month, let alone an entire school year. Well, that's exactly what happened to more than 150 000 Indigenous kids who had to go to residential schools far from their homes.

Across the country, children aged 4 to 16 were taken from their families by the Canadian government. They were forced to attend residential schools for the whole school year, and sometimes even longer.

In school, children had to cut their hair, wear a uniform, and be called by an English name, or worse yet, just a number.

They also had to follow very strict rules, or they could be punished harshly. Many Indigenous children spoke their own languages at home, but they were forbidden to do so at school.

The Mohawk Institute Residential School in Brantford, Ontario, was the first recognized residential school. Founded in 1828 as the Mechanics' Institute, it became a full residential school for boys and girls in 1834.

The first residential schools were run by churches. Many students had to take part in church activities that were strange to them.

Later, the schools were turned into boarding schools under the Canadian government's control. More than 130 schools operated across Canada between 1831 and 1996.

When children were taken from their homes, it had a huge impact on communities. Parents and grandparents were sad and lonely without any children around, and the whole circle of life was broken.

Girls in sewing class at the Fort Resolution Indian Residential School in the Northwest Territories.

Boys lined up in rows at the Brandon Indian Residential School in Brandon, Manitoba, in 1960.

Without any children around, some people lost the ability to parent. They had no model of what family life looked like before residential schools. Some of the children who were taken away to school never learned how to show love to their own children—never hugging them or kissing them good night.

Culture is another thing that was taken away by residential schools. Children didn't learn about their culture, and many didn't have any opportunities to learn even after they grew up. There are generations of Indigenous people who have lost their culture because of this. Thankfully, many people are working hard to regain this knowledge.

Many Indigenous languages are disappearing because kids were forbidden to speak their language at residential school. Being forced to speak English or French for most of the year meant that many simply forgot how to speak the language of their ancestors. And when they became adults, they couldn't teach their children how to speak the language either. As Elders and Knowledge Keepers get older, there are fewer chances to regain these language skills. Young people learning their language become even more important because of this.

This scene is from *We Were Children*, a 2012 film by Tim Wolochatuk. The film recounts the story of Lyna Hart and Glen Anagood, who were both taken from their homes at a very young age and sent to residential school.



Language — Revisit the quote on the Contents page by Freda Ahenakew: “Knowing your language gives you an inner strength and pride in your heritage.” What does this quote mean to you? Think about the importance of knowing your language in learning about your culture and heritage. What effect would being cut off from learning your language have on you? What has been the experience of Indigenous children? What are Indigenous Peoples doing today to revitalize their languages?



Connecting to the Final Project

Remember that an important part of reconciliation is learning about the history and culture of Indigenous Peoples. Think about the impact that residential schools had on Indigenous communities over more than 150 years, and the impact they continue to have today.



Further Inquiry

How are different communities working to heal from the legacy of residential schools? What actions could you take to participate in this healing process?

Understanding the Page:

- 1 On page 32, former residential school student Jacob Pratt is quoted as saying, "We weren't allowed to talk, move, or do anything. And if you did, you'd have to go to the back of the line, and you didn't want to do that because there's only so much good food, and then you'd have to eat the food that was leftover—if there was any food by the time you got your turn." When you read this quote, how do you feel? Does Jacob's school experience sound anything like yours? Explain your answer.
- 2 On page 33, Rosanna Deerchild shares that when she was a child, her mother, Edna Ferguson, showed little physical affection. What ways did Rosanna's mother show her love despite being unable to hug her children? What does Edna's story tell you about the effects that residential schools continue to have on families today?
- 3 We learn on page 33 that in 2008 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission began travelling across Canada collecting the stories of Survivors of residential schools. Why was it important for Survivors to tell their stories?
- 4 Why was it important for Edna Ferguson to hear the stories of other residential school Survivors?
- 5 Why is it important to learn about the experiences of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in residential schools? What can we learn from their experiences in these schools? Should we share what we learn? Explain your thinking.



Social Studies — Often residential schools are talked about as if they existed in the deep past. However, based on Jacob Pratt's story on page 32, we learn that he is only 33 years old and is a former residential school student. Do you find it surprising that these schools existed up until 1996? Explain why you are, or are not, surprised.



Social Studies — In Jacob Pratt's short piece about his experience, he described what is called a "day school." Rosanna Deerchild on page 33 describes her mother's experience in a residential school. Read both of these stories and describe what the difference is between a day school and a residential school. Why are both types of schools sometimes described as residential schools? What is the common message that people are trying to get across when they describe them as the same thing?

Although residential schools seem as though they happened long ago, the last one only closed down in 1996. What happened in these schools is still affecting people's lives today.

Jacob Pratt's Story

Jacob Pratt is from both the Dakota and Saulteaux Nations. He went to the Gordon Indian Residential School as a day school student from grades 3 to 7. The school was on the George Gordon First Nations in Saskatchewan.



"I had no other options for school than to go to this residential school on my reserve. The school was run very military-like. For instance, when we had to eat, we would run as fast as we could to the lunch area and we weren't allowed to talk, move, or do anything. And if you did, you'd have to go to the back of the line, and you didn't want to do that because there's only so much good food, and then you'd have to eat the food that was leftover—if there was any food by the time you got your turn."

The conditions at the school Jacob went to were not as harsh as the conditions that some students of residential schools faced. Many students consider themselves "Survivors," because the treatment they faced at school was so difficult.

"I don't consider myself a Survivor. I consider myself a former residential school student, but not a Survivor," Jacob says.

At only 33 years old, Jacob is one of the youngest former residential school attendees in Canada.

Think About It!
What do you learn from your family that you can't learn from other people? How would residential schools affect that learning?

My Mother's Story

By Rosanna Deerchild

For most of my life, my mother was a stranger to me.

When I was a wee Deerchild, she showed little physical affection, was quick to anger, and suffered from depression. She also struggled with alcohol and a difficult marriage.

She showed her love in other ways: she kept the house clean, kept us clean, sheltered and fed us. Every day, my mother brushed and braided my hair while she hummed and sent me off to school with soup and sandwiches.

I know she cared, but I never understood her. To me, she was a mystery and it wasn't until I was in high school that I learned her dark secret. It took another 20 years before she shared her story with me.

My mother, Edna Ferguson, is a residential school Survivor. Born in 1945 in South Indian Lake, Manitoba, she was raised in the North—on the land with her parents and two older sisters.

But that would all be taken away from her. After her dad died on the trapline and her mom died after getting sick with tuberculosis, she was sent away. She arrived at her first school when she was just five years old.

"You didn't go to school to learn. All you learned was to be mean. I didn't learn nothing. I didn't know how to read, and when I talked Cree they grabbed your hair and bang bang on the floor. I was too young to fight for myself."

She went to three residential schools between the ages of 5 and 14. After returning to South Indian Lake, she tried to put the past behind her.



Rosanna Deerchild and her mother Edna Ferguson

"I kept everything to myself. I didn't want to talk about it. I thought people would laugh at me or say, 'Don't make up a story.' That's what they used to say when we went home after school. They didn't believe what we were talking about. What happened at school. What the nuns were doing. What the priests were doing."

In 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission began travelling across Canada collecting the stories of Survivors. When they set up in Winnipeg in 2010, I took a chance and asked my mom if she would come with me, just to listen, to know that she was not alone.



What started out as a way for Rosanna's mother to tell her residential school story turned into a six-year healing journey and a book of poetry. Calling Down the Sky.



Global Connections — Residential schools happened in places other than Canada, including the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Learn about how these schools worked in other countries by doing some research. Why do you think Indigenous people were treated in similar ways in countries around the world? What can we learn from these experiences?



Links to Inquiry Question

Now that you have read many of the selections in this book, think about the inquiry question: "What makes communities strong?" Write down your opinions. Have your opinions changed? How have they changed? How have your opinions been challenged? Discuss the opinions and think about the question as a group.



Think About It!

What do you learn from your family that you can't learn from other people? How would residential schools affect that learning?



Further Inquiry

The discovery of unmarked graves on the grounds of former residential schools over the summer in 2021 made the horror of residential schools real for many Canadians. It also confirmed what Survivors of residential schools told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. What else can we learn from the Survivors' stories? What can we do to ensure that their stories are no longer ignored? For example, on Orange Shirt Day on September 30 wear an orange shirt to support Indigenous children and learn about residential schools, encourage others to take part in reconciliation, take a pledge of reconciliation yourself, learn about the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, or take action on any of the Calls to Action in the TRC.