



Circles for Reconciliation Gathering Theme

Métis Experience at Residential Schools

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Métis children were included in the residential school system and system of ‘Indian’ day schools from the time that the schools first opened, until the closure of the last school in 1996. Along with First Nations and Inuit students, Métis attended the schools forcibly and in later years of the schools’ administration, also attended voluntarily. While many Métis Survivors share stories of similar school experiences to First Nations and Inuit students, there were often conditions around the admission of Métis students and their treatment by staff and fellow students that made their experiences quite distinct.

In the residential school era, Métis were not considered ‘Indians’ legally, under Canada’s Indian Act. They were considered the responsibility of the provincial governments and often education and health support for Métis fell into a jurisdictional gap between these levels of government. In large boarding-style residential schools, Métis were often considered ‘outsiders’ and their attendance at the schools depended on a number of different variables. At the end of the nineteenth century, Métis were cast as ‘rebellious’ and were often considered to be ‘the dispossessed’. For most of the first half of the twentieth century Métis were marginalized politically, economically and socially. Their treatment in Canadian society often mirrored their treatment in the schools and whether or not they would be taken to residential schools, mission schools, day schools, provincial schools or no schools at all.

Early in the administration of the boarding-style residential schools in Canada, the Department of Indian Affairs circulated a document to schools about the ‘Admission of Halfbreeds’ into their schools. Métis or ‘Halfbreeds’ were to be considered in three classes, by the schools. Their class would determine whether or not they were to be admitted to schools. In the early years of the residential schools’ administration (1890-1920), correspondence from the Department of Indian Affairs would often cite the following ‘classes’ for Halfbreeds:

Halfbreeds may be grouped into three fairly well-defined classes.

- 1. Those who live, in varying degrees of conditions, the ordinary settled life of the country.*
- 2. Those who live, in varying degrees, the Indian mode of life.*

3. *Those who—and they form the most unfortunate class in the community—are the illegitimate offspring of Indian women, and of whom white men are not the begetters.*

Those of the first class make no claim upon the Government of the Dominion for the education of their children; nor has any such claim as far as the knowledge of the undersigned goes been made on their behalf. The third class are entitled to participate in the benefits of the Indian schools; and in so far as the afore quoted ... [w]hen Indian Treaties are made the illegitimate children ... of Indian treaty women were excluded and payment of their annuity money for them on their behalf was refused. That policy appears to have been adopted to discourage illegitimate breeding. As to the second class of Halfbreed the undersigned at once admit that they present a difficult educational problem, but the very difficulty effects a strong reason against drawing a hard and fast line such as it drawn. This second class of Halfbreeds maybe divided into three groups:

1. *Those who live apart from Indians but follow somewhat Indian mode of life*
2. *Those who live in the vicinity of Indian Reserves*
3. *[Those who] [l]ive on the Reserves*

(Provincial Archives of Manitoba, n.d.)

Many Métis still attended outside of this class system for various reasons. Occasionally, skin colour would influence whether or not a student looked more or less ‘Indian’ to the administrators of the school. Additionally, many Métis families were Catholic families and they would be admitted into residential schools or day schools according to the denomination of the schools operating the school. Admission to schools often appeared to be ad-hoc, or later on, taken on a case-by-case basis.

Social, political and economic factors also influenced whether or not school officials, RCMP or clergy would take Métis children from a specific family or community to a residential school. Métis fell into a jurisdictional gap and lived hidden lives in many parts of Canada. Métis leader Malcolm Norris once said about the Métis and education:

I have always understood that it was against the law not to send the children to school, and Inspectors are maintained for that very purpose, but unfortunately our people have been discriminated against, and to such an extent, that even though they may pay taxes, no steps are taken by the authorities to see that their children are sent to school, apparently the Halfbreed is not worth caring about. (TRC, 2015, p. 26)

Métis political resistance grew in the later half of the twentieth century and their campaigns advocated strongly for better education for Métis communities. They often

cited these government and church failings between the systems that left Métis falling through the cracks.

Métis Experiences at Residential School

In a school system built originally as a ‘solution’ to the ‘Indian Problem’ and operated by Indian Affairs, Métis were outside of federal responsibility and had been socially and politically relegated to the margins of Canadian society. Whether century. Since they sometimes attended residential schools without official federal funding, they were not provided with food, access to washrooms or school uniforms like the rest of the students. In schools already notorious for their legacies of neglect and abuse, excluding students based on ‘class’ structure and government-constructed identities created added pressures on children at the schools. Whether that move was literal or metaphorical, Métis existed in the margins of society and the road allowances¹ of non-Indigenous communities for several decades of the 20th century. A brief addition to the seven volumes of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is a history of Métis experiences at residential school. One of the stories included in the report, from a Métis student describes bullying by other students:

When attending the Pine Creek residential school in Manitoba, Raphael Ironstand, a boy of mixed descent who had been raised in a First Nations community, was bullied by Cree students. The Crees surrounded me, staring at me with hatred in their eyes, as again they called me ‘Monias,’ while telling me the school was for Indians only. I tried to tell them I was not a Monias, which I now knew meant white man, but a real Indian. That triggered their attack, in unison. I was kicked, punched, bitten, and my hair was pulled out by the roots. My clothes were also shredded, but the Crees suddenly disappeared, leaving me lying on the ground, bleeding and bruised. Although the sisters had shown little sympathy at the time, Ironstand had a very special memory of a nun who showed him kindness. I poured out my story to this understanding nun about my confused feelings, being a non-person with white skin, even though I was an Indian. At that she put her arm around me and assured me that I was a very important person to her, which immediately raised my self-esteem. It was the first time since I came to the school that anyone had touched me without punishing or beating me. As she ushered me out of the door, she stopped and gave me a hug, which made me feel warm all over. Such shows of affection were rare. Even if they developed close friendships, most

¹ “The Road Allowance People were the Métis, who, without a homeland, were forced to build homes and communities on the crown land known as “road allowance” land set aside for a highway. They lived a precarious existence, welcome neither in white settlements nor allowed to live on Treaty land. The Crown land, of course, could be appropriated or developed at any time; people were often burned out of their homes or otherwise forced to move.” (Pogue, 2013)

students felt unloved.
(TRC, 2015, p. 53)

Métis Survivors often described feeling bullied by fellow students, members of staff and their communities when they returned home from residential school. In some places, Métis were often cast as ‘worse off than Indians’ or because they were Halfbreeds, they were considered by others to be less than either one of their ‘halves’.

Inside Métis communities, the myths and stereotypes about the Métis damaged many, but also fueled centuries of resistance and resurgence. Métis carried on with their political, legal and social structures, even hidden and often while they were being sternly discriminated against. Métis languages also came under threat during residential school eras and through ongoing colonialism in Canada. Métis languages and cultures have experienced a resurgence and Métis often lead movements towards ongoing resistance and reconciliation in Canada. Métis, First Nations and Inuit across Canada survived these colonial structures and school systems. Their times in schools included struggles but they undoubtedly included strength, as well.

Métis were not officially included in the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) and many feel left out in this contemporary era of apology, compensation and reconciliation. Many attended day schools and schools that were not included in the official settlement agreement. Métis communities still face barriers placed up by government definitions and imposed identities. Métis communities will face the barriers as they always have though, and continue to redefine, maintain their own identities and rely on the unquestionable strength of their communities.

For additional stories about Métis experiences, or for more information, please see:

Canada’s Residential Schools: The Métis Experience. The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. 2015.

http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Volume_3_M%C3%A9tis_English_Web.pdf

Métis History and Experience and Residential Schools. Larry Chartrand, Tricia Logan and Judy Daniels. 2006. <http://www.ahf.ca/downloads/metisweb.pdf>

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