Learning the Unlearned: A Call for Settler Education on Residential Schools in NL, Canada, and Beyond

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Researcher's Positionality & Acknowledgement

- Kailey is a **settler**, born and raised in St. John's, Newfoundland, with family ties throughout the Avalon Peninsula—home of the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk since immemorial. As someone new to Indigenous Studies, she comes into this space with an **openness to re-learn colonial views of the past**.
- Jared is a **settler** with family roots in Conception Bay North and Central Newfoundland—home of the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq since immemorial. In his work, he strives to **help correct colonial misconceptions** about Indigenous history, motivated by his experience growing up in urban Newfoundland and **not learning about Indigenous Peoples**.
- We would like to recognize that the territory we gather is the **unceded** and **ancestral territory** of the **Beothuk** and **Mi'kmaq**. We also want to acknowledge the territory known as Labrador as the **ancestral territory** of the **Inuit** and **Innu**.

Trigger Warning

- This poster refers to **identity-based discrimination**, **past trauma**, and **contemporary injustices** towards Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge that this content may **be difficult** and readers should **proceed with caution**.

Introduction

- Many non-Indigenous residents in Canada **do not know about Residential Schools** and their **severe** and **long-lasting negative impact** on **generations of Indigenous Peoples**.
- Residential Schools **forcibly removed children** from their families, **prohibited** cultural practices and way of life, and led to **widespread abuse** (physical, verbal, and sexual).
- The goal of Residential Schools was to **"remove the Indian from the child"** by forcefully assimilating Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian society.
- Assimilation involved removing children's **connection to their families** and **communities**—effectively cutting them off from their culture, resulting in the **loss** of **family relationships**, **language**, and **culture**.
- Residential Schools, operated under **Federal Government policy**, were run by mainly Christian churches, with at least **139 institutions** in operation from the **1830s to 1996**.
- Many non-Indigenous residents in NL **likely think** or **have heard** that **Residential Schools were not present in our province**—a popular narrative perpetuated by the **omission of Indigenous Peoples in NL** from the **Federal Apology** on Residential Schools in 2008.
- NL residents **do not learn much about Residential Schools**—it is **not included in the NL curriculum**.
- Both Kailey and Jared are settlers ashamed that their public education in the province did not include Residential Schools or Indigenous history. However, they wish to inform others, and one way is through this poster presentation, where they briefly discuss **Residential Schools in Canada**, **Other Colonial States**, and **NL**.
- Kailey and Jared recognize that **nothing can replace Indigenous Peoples' speaking for themselves**. We strongly encourage everyone to read Procter's book, which has been written with and for Residential School Survivors in NL, and various Indigenous-authored resources available in the Resources & Reference List.

Residential Schools in Canada

- More than **130 Residential Schools** were in operation in Canada between **1831-1996**.
- An estimated **150,000 children** were separated from their families, forced out of their homes and communities, and forbidden from using their native language or participating in their cultural practices.
- As part of the systematic effort to **erase Indigenous identity**, authorities even **assigned new English** or **Christian names** to replace **traditional Indigenous names** (e.g., boys became "John" or "James" & girls became "Mary" or "Margaret").
- Schools had **horrendous conditions**; many of the students suffered from **severe physical**, **mental**, and **sexual abuse**.
- Students were often **malnourished**, making them susceptible to illnesses like **influenza** and **tuberculosis**.
- Residential Schools were used for **experimentation** on the **effects of poor nutrition** and **dental care** in children.
- Approximately **6,000 (likely many more) children died** in Residential Schools, although the precise number is unknown because the **Federal Government** and the **Churches did not keep accurate records**.

Residential Schools in Other Colonial States (Part 1)

- Residential Schools are not uniquely Canadian; they were a tool used by colonial Empires worldwide, including **Aotearoa / New Zealand (Oceania)**, **Myanmar (Asia)**, **and Norway (Europe)**, to name a few. These schools all attempted to assimilate Indigenous Peoples in the area into the dominant settler society using various policies.

1. **Aotearoa / New Zealand, Oceania**
   - Residential Schools, often called "Native Schools" or "Māori Schools" established in the **1800s** as part of colonial policies, sought to **assimilate Māori children—Māori** are the Indigenous Peoples of Aotearoa (present-day New Zealand). These schools **suppressed their language** and **culture** and **promoted European customs**, causing lasting cultural erosion and intergenerational trauma within Māori communities.

Residential Schools in Other Colonial States (Part 2)

2. **Myanmar (formerly "Burma"), Asia**
   - Residential Schools in Myanmar were first established by the **British Empire** and **missionaries** to "civilize" Indigenous Peoples (i.e., **Chin**, **Karen**, and **Kachin**). Schools were later expanded by the post-British government under **"Burmanization" policies**. Today, they **continue to operate under state control**—perpetuating cultural loss and intergenerational trauma for Indigenous communities in Myanmar.
3. **Norway, Europe**
   - The **Sámi**, Indigenous Peoples from the Arctic region of **Sápmi** (spanning present-day Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia), have been facing assimilation policies since the **1700s** by the **Norwegian Government**. These policies are aimed at erasing Sámi language and culture. Despite post-World War II efforts to improve Sámi rights, they **continue to fight for their cultural preservation and Indigenous rights**.

Residential Schools in Newfoundland and Labrador

- Residential Schools, commonly called Boarding Schools, operated in Newfoundland and Labrador from about **1898** until the last one closed in **1980**—think about it…the 1980s were **only 40 years ago**!
- **Six Boarding Schools** were operating mainly in **Labrador**, with **one** on the **Northern Peninsula** of Newfoundland (See Table 1)—St. Anthony Institution was less of a school and more of an orphanage but still worked to assimilate and remove Indigenous children from their families and culture.
- These institutions were run by the **Moravian Mission**, the **International Grenfell Association**, the **Newfoundland Colonial Government**, and the **Canadian Government**.
- These schools **forcibly removed** children from communities like Black Tickle, Hopedale, Nain, and Sheshatshiu, isolating them from their families and cultures.
- Students often faced **systemic cultural erasure**, **neglect**, and **abuse**, including **harsh discipline/beatings**, **forced labour**, **withholding food**, and being **forced to eat regurgitated food**.
- Survivors report being **humiliated** in these institutions and being seen as **"dirty"** or **"uncivilized"** by staff. One survivor shared:
  - *"We were all going in this room, getting our heads checked, putting all this old stuff on our heads, burning my neck. Getting our hair cut, just like we were coming out of a cave or something"* (Procter, 2020, pg. 275)
- On **November 24, 2017**, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau formally **apologized** on behalf of Canada to former students and their families, **finally acknowledging the harm inflicted** after being left out of the 2008 Federal Apology.
- This apology was significant mainly because of the efforts of **Toby Obed**, an Inuk from Hopedale and a Yale School survivor. Obed served as the **lead plaintiff** in a class-action lawsuit that brought national attention to the injustices experienced in Newfoundland and Labrador Residential Schools.
- In **2023**, NL Premier Furey apologized to **NunatuKavut Inuit Survivors** in Central and Southern Labrador.

Reconciliation & What Settlers Can Do

- The **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** (TRC) of Canada (2008–2015) played a pivotal role in addressing the harm caused by the **Residential School System**. The TRC was based on **Truth** and **Reconciliation**, defining each as:
  - **Truth**: involves **recognizing the realities of past events**, including the injustices and harm caused to Indigenous Peoples. It involves being honest about the past and ongoing impacts of colonization on individuals, communities, and cultures.
  - **Reconciliation**: involves **repairing broken relationships by fostering mutual respect**, **understanding**, and a **commitment to moving forward together**. It requires acknowledging past wrongs, taking responsibility, and making meaningful changes to ensure a better and more equitable future.
  - **Truth and Reconciliation**: together mean **accepting the truth about historical** and **ongoing injustices**, and working to **rebuild relationships** between settlers and Indigenous Peoples through **understanding**, **respect**, and **action**.
- Ultimately, the TRC issued **94 Calls to Action** (C2A) in 2015 to foster healing, justice, and reconciliation—aimed at Government, Provinces, Territories, and settlers to **guide reconciliation in Canada**.
- Despite almost **10 years** since the C2A were released, **only 13 C2A** have been achieved to date.
- One of the completed C2A (#80) was achieved in 2021:
  - **C2A #80** called on the Federal Gov't to establish a statutory **Truth and Reconciliation holiday** in Canada.
  - **September 30th** was designated the **National Day for Truth and Reconciliation** to honour Survivors and their families.
  - This holiday, coinciding with **Orange Shirt Day** established in 2013, symbolizes **resilience** and **remembrance** of the cultural losses endured by Indigenous children, inspired by Residential School Survivor, Phyllis Webstad.

- **What Can Settlers Do to Support Reconciliation?**
  - **Learn**: Settlers can educate themselves on Indigenous history, cultures, and the impacts of colonialism, including Residential Schools. This understanding fosters empathy and a foundation for reconciliation.
  - **Supporting Indigenous Voices & Rights**: Crucial actions include listening to Indigenous communities, amplifying their voices, and advocating for their rights. This can involve supporting Indigenous-led initiatives and pushing for policies recognizing and respecting Indigenous self-determination.
  - **Personal Accountability**: Settlers should reflect on how they benefit from historical and ongoing inequalities. Acknowledging these advantages, they can challenge and address unfair systems in their lives and communities.