

Education and Aboriginal Peoples *

Before contact with Europeans, First Nations people had their own educational processes. Education was a life-long process and the goal was to become a responsible member of society. Each person was trained to do something which contributed to the overall well-being of the community. Children were taught by all members of the community and the Elders were the transmitters of knowledge and wisdom. A close relationship with the environment and learning about the relationship with nature was an essential component of a child's upbringing.

When the British Crown settled the territory known today as Canada, education became the primary instrument used to 'assimilate' and 'civilize' Aboriginal people. The Dominion Government established residential and industrial schools following the signing of the numbered treaties. The objectives were not only to 'civilize' and 'Christianize' but also to teach reading, writing and arithmetic. Residential schools needed to be self-sufficient, so one of the goals was also to teach children how to become farmers and housekeepers. The entire process was designed to allow First Nations people to eventually assimilate into mainstream Euro-Canadian society.

Many children were taken from their families around the age of five or six years old and saw their families perhaps once a year until they

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were fifteen or sixteen years old. While at school, they were not allowed to speak their language or practice their spiritual and cultural customs. At residential schools, children also encountered physical, sexual, emotional and mental abuse.

Residential schools nearly destroyed First Nations communities and left a legacy of despair that was not addressed until 1972 when the National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations) published a document entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education*. The document was released in response to then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's 1969 White Paper. The White Paper called for the elimination of Treaty rights, the transfer of responsibility for First Nations people to the provinces and the elimination of the Department of Indian Affairs and the Indian Act.

The National Indian Brotherhood proposed that First Nations people needed to have greater parental responsibility and local control of education. In 1975, Dr. Lloyd Barber became the President of the University of Regina and was able to work with First Nations people in establishing the only First Nation owned and controlled post-secondary educational institution - the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (now the First Nations University of Canada).

Métis people had a different experience than First Nations people. For the most part, Métis children who were born during the fur trade era were educated in one of two ways. Those children who lived with First Nations communities were raised and educated in a traditional First Nation manner. Those who lived with the fur trade community were raised and educated in a Christian and European manner. Schooling was provided in mission schools which were established near trading posts. Often, the male children were sent to mission schools while the female children had a more traditional First Nation education that was

passed on by their mother who was often of First Nation descent.

The quality of education deteriorated after the signing of the numbered treaties and the Northwest Resistance in 1885. Some Métis children were allowed to attend Residential or Industrial schools if there was room. For the most part, the education of Métis children was haphazard at best. During this time, neither the federal nor the provincial governments assumed responsibility for the rights and issues of Métis people. The federal government contended that the Métis had signed away their rights during the Scrip process while provincial governments felt that the responsibility for both First Nation and Métis people should fall with the federal government.

Although Métis children were finally allowed to attend public school, no attention was paid to their culture or language. Despite the fact of the grave socio-economic conditions of Métis people, little or no attention was paid to those dispossessed Métis who were forced to live on government road allowances. These Métis came to be known as the 'Road Allowance People'.

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