Reconsidering the Legacy of Residential Schools and Aboriginal Adoption

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The author of this important take on the legacy of Canada's Indian residential schools, freely available to all readers, and re-posted with his kind permission is Rick August, a former social policy analyst with the government of Saskatchewan.

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There is a great deal of room for debate about the effectiveness of Canadian Aboriginal policy, past and present. I would argue, however, that since the withdrawal of the federal White Paper on Indian Policy in 1970, governments have largely abdicated their responsibility for development of policy, standing aside in favour of advocacy processes that may or may not accurately reflect the interests of either Aboriginal people or the general Canadian public.

A case in point is the rather successful campaign by advocates to characterize the former residential school system as a uniformly destructive experience for Aboriginal students, and the root cause of continuing family dysfunction in Aboriginal communities. If this characterization is correct, then blame for current Aboriginal social problems can be easily assigned. On closer examination, however, the historic role of the residential schools relative to contemporary problems may not be so clear-cut.

Residential schools were an attempt by the Canadian government, working with the major Christian churches, to create an educational system for children of Status Indians. Clearly, the schools were intended to equip Aboriginal children with new knowledge and skills to help them participate in a much different economy and lifestyle than that of Aboriginal societies that existed prior to European colonization.

That many individual cases of abuse occurred within these institutions is well-documented. This, unfortunately, seems to be a failure of human nature common to all institutional power relationships. Whether the residential school experience was uniformly negative for students, however, or whether the schools were a force widely destructive to Aboriginal family life, is much less clear.

One person who knows a great deal about what happened in Canadian residential schools is John Siebert. As an employee of the United Church when abuse claims began to emerge in the 1990s, he spent the better part of six years in the National Archives, trying to understand the residential schools' history.

His research led him to a more balanced assessment of the positive and negative impacts of the residential schools. He observed that, since less than 25% of Aboriginal children ever attended residential schools, it was highly unlikely they could be responsible for destroying Aboriginal culture or family integrity, as advocates have claimed. He was more concerned to note that 15-20% of Aboriginal children appeared to get no education, residential or otherwise.

Siebert noted that, at least in the period between World War II and the closure of the schools in the late 1960s, the residential schools were primarily child welfare institutions – that is to say, most of the children in the schools were sent there by Indian agents to protect them from abuse and neglect in their family homes.

This is an extremely important fact to consider when assessing the residential school legacy. Advocates are at pains to stress the damaging aspects of the residential school experience, but it must also be acknowledged that in most cases the schools, whatever their shortcomings, were aiming to protect Aboriginal children from abuse and neglect in parental homes, and in this sense, they were a response to family dysfunction, rather than its cause. One needs to consider that the fate of many Aboriginal children absent the intervention of the residential schools could well have been much worse.

Siebert's general observations for Canada are reinforced by a detailed, published study of Saskatchewan residential schools conducted by social worker George Caldwell of the National Welfare Council in 1967, in the twilight years of the residential schools. Caldwell's report confirms that the province's residential schools were primarily child welfare institutions, used as out-of-family placement resources by reserve administrators who did not then have access to the provincial child welfare system.

Mr. Caldwell's report contains a wealth of carefully organized survey data on students' experience in the schools which could assist scholars in objectively assessing the schools' role in students' lives. Caldwell's summaries of interviews with former students are also revealing. Most graduates thought it was time to phase out the residential school system, but at the same time, most also thought that it was time for the reserves themselves to be abolished.

Government's abdication of a role in assessing historic Aboriginal policy has left the door open for one-sided analysis and the enforcement of advocacy perspectives by sometimes unsavoury tactics. Mr. Siebert, for his part, was vilified as a racist, and his book on the residential schools, which could have contributed greatly to a reasoned debate, was rejected by numerous publishers afraid to face similar, entirely unjustified, accusations.

More recently a Canadian senator was similarly attacked, and indeed removed from some of her posts, for stating a rather obvious truth – that much good was done in the residential schools by good people, along with some bad things by bad people. One of her assailants was an Aboriginal MP who equated the residential schools with genocide and the Holocaust, and faced not a jot of criticism for such irresponsible and inflammatory hyperbole.

A similar vilification campaign is underway with respect to the so-called "Sixties Scoop". This is a term coined by a journalist for the practice, most common in the late 1960s and early 1970s, of adoption of Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal families.

Aboriginal adoption was an early consequence of the closure of the residential schools. Indian agents no longer had the schools available as a resource for alternative care of children. As a result, the federal government began to establish relationships with provincial child welfare systems to access their resources, including adoption programs.

In Saskatchewan, the Adopt Indian Metis program (AIM) oversaw the adoption, between 1967 and 1975, of a total of 1,005 Aboriginal children into mostly non-Aboriginal families. Every one of these children, prior to adoption, was what is referred to in child welfare terminology as a permanent ward. This means that the child has been permanently removed from their parents' home due to persistent abuse or neglect, and the legal responsibility for parenting that child has been transferred to the state. Child welfare workers of the day will tell you, as they have told me, that the adoption processes they managed were the best available option for the children they served. In the 1960s and 1970s, as today, the options for a permanent ward are adoption into a stable family or foster care. Long-term foster care, as we know, is rarely a good substitute for a stable, loving home for a child, regardless of the cultural identity of the foster parents.

It is obviously true that, in most cases, adoption of an Aboriginal child into a non-Aboriginal home separated the child, at least temporarily, from his or her Aboriginal cultural roots. This was particularly true in old model adoption processes that emphasized creating a clean break from birth families. The effect of this cultural disconnect on child outcomes is open to debate, but one needs to be clear that the alternatives – being raised by neglectful or abusive parents, or being raised by a series of foster parents – would almost certainly have been worse for the vast majority of adoptee children.

The Saskatchewan government is apparently planning to apologize for its role in Aboriginal adoption. This would be a highly questionable action, since it implies that Saskatchewan was wrong to offer adoption resources to Aboriginal children, or that child welfare workers of the AIM era mis-served Aboriginal children whose adoption they facilitated. The federal and Saskatchewan governments were clearly attempting, in good faith, to provide the best available response for vulnerable Aboriginal children, and if their efforts seem to have short-comings in the light of history, they were applying best available practices of the time.

It is important that we take the right lessons from the successes and failures of past Aboriginal policies such as residential schools and cross-cultural adoption. This requires taking a balanced and nuanced approach to analysis. Governments that abdicate responsibility for rigorous analysis invite failure to extract accurate lessons from history, which serves neither Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal citizens well.