First Nations Women in Education in Canada

Melanie Minnabarriet

History 3510 The History of Childhood and Education

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Throughout my life education has been something my dad has always supported. He would always tell me to get an education, while swinging his finger in my face[[1]](#footnote-1). Growing up I knew my dad struggled with reading and writing, but I did not understand the extent until later in my life when he explained that English was not his first language. When his time came to join the public-school system, he was physically beaten and verbally abused because his teachers were irritated that he did not know English, his first language is a mix of Secwepemc and Nlakapamux. Ultimately, his mom was threated to “stop speaking Indian” to the children at home, or else. There started my dad’s relationship with the education system. While that was my dad’s experience, the females in the Minnabarriet family, somewhat excelled in education, as a direct opposite factor. I will explore the history of First Nation education in Canada, the effects of trauma, that may contribute to the difficulties my father faced and I will explore Canada’s role in the emphasis on religion to transform Indigenous peoples to proper Canadian citizens. The hardships from the history of First Nations education has established a complicated yet resilient relationship between First Nation people, and the education system in Canada and with the policies and structures that supported First Nations women in excelling in the school system. Education was a tool for oppression, but over time, First Nations people have overcome traumas and are using education as a tool for success.

Education has a particularly dark history for First Nations people in Canada. The start of it was just after Confederation, Canadian government policy was to assimilate Aboriginal children into Euro-Canadian society and to obliterate Aboriginal language and culture. To implement this policy, Aboriginal children were removed from their parents to attend residential schools in which staff managed all aspects of their lives, children were usually forbidden to speak Aboriginal languages or to engage in cultural or spiritual practices. In 1920, the Indian Act was amended to compel Aboriginal children to attend residential schools. Aboriginal children were not permitted access to public schools until 1950, and even then, experienced racism and discrimination at the hands of teachers, administration, and peers.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the context of religious education, the “state” put so some emphasis on separating First Nations children from their parents, but in turn, not non-First Nations children, “no person is adequately educated for the responsibilities of life a as Canadian citizen whose religious and moral possibilities have been lift undeveloped. The home and the church are primarily responsible for the religious instruction of the child.” [[3]](#footnote-3) In looking at race as a category of analysis, the discrimination that First Nations families endured because of racialized beliefs was apparent in the violent and neglectful acts of the residential school systems. While it is constantly suggested that white parents, or Anglo-Saxon families were fit to teach their children morals and values aligned with what the state wanted, the state did not a) trust First Nations people in terms of following their rules, and b) did not believe First Nations parents had the ability to teach about Anglo-Saxon values or morals.

Education was understood to provide a Euro-Canadian education to Aboriginal students, on the expectation that education would prove their adult prospects for employment and social integration. However, because of their inadequate curriculum, staffing issues, instruction time, restricted parental involvement, and maltreatment, the majority of students never progressed beyond the elementary school level, and many were poorly prepared for adult employment. [[4]](#footnote-4) Education seemed to be reform, and control of the society; white, English speaking children, and for Indigenous children, still control, but also it was assimilation, instead of education. McDonald describes it as “the great task of the school, then, to direct not only intellectual behaviour but also moral and social behaviour. The safety of the state depended on the “safe” citizen. The ideal state was one in which there was order, stability, and loyalty.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Harper and Thompson explain that, “historically, colonial-inspired education was blatantly aimed at molding all Indigenous students into European-acceptable subjects.”[[6]](#footnote-6) When I was younger, some of my friends went to church on Sunday’s and I was always jealous they got to spend that time together outside of school, my dad would never let my siblings and I attend, I know understand he believed a Sunday school was another form of power and assimilation. Dafoe explains, “I do not think the influence of church on a child can be overemphasized. It matters little what church a person belongs to but the teaching one learns there helps to guide the individual throughout life. I think religious training is essential to make a well-rounded better citizen.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

While I could not exactly find answers as to why First Nations women in my family chose to pursue education specifically, when not many First Nation people were, this is where talking with my Aunt was helpful. She explained that since her mom, my Kye7e, lost her status, she was so angry she felt she was stripped of her identity. She had felt the “white man” laws were to blame. My aunt described long conversations with my Kye7e discussing how life could improve for First Nations people. [[8]](#footnote-8)While everyone in my family understands healing happens in different ways, at different times, the men in my family were having a hard time healing from their experiences. “colonial processes of racism, sexism, and a class-divided economy have relegated Native women, as a group, to the lowest rung of decision-making power within Canadian society.” [[9]](#footnote-9) So, my Kye7e being a strong Matriarch, put the responsibilities on the women.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In my childhood I had heard that my Auntie Verna had gone to residential school for one year. When I finally talked to her, she assured me that she had never actually attended residential school. She had been taken to the Kamloops Indian Residential School, but when my grandparents heard she had been taken there, they went and picked her up, and left, all in the same day. My Aunt said she realized how lucky she was, that she never had to endure a night in that school, so she told herself she would not take school, and being able to stay at home, ever. With the success she experienced through elementary, secondary, and post secondary, the support started at a federal level with key groups making noise. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood issued a policy paper entitled “Indian control over Indian education,” triggering the federal government to adopt a limited version of the principle of Aboriginal control over Aboriginal education. This then changed the premise of education from a means for assimilation to thinking of it as a means of revitalization of Indian cultures and economies.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the historical context of the establishment of schools, it was largely due to social control, but now in the 1970s and even to the 1990s, school was not the factor, it was the education.

In terms of discussing the impacts that a formal education had on the men in my family is discussed by Jean Barman in that, “Indigenous peoples have the highest rates of impoverishment, incarnation, suicide, and alcoholism in Canada.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The importance of education my dad had was huge, and I could never understand why he put education on such a high pedestal when he had such a negative experience, and even that he knew his mother his aunts and uncles had such a negative experience with school. The education field has been tainted from the start in terms of First Nations and non-First Nations relations. Perhaps this is why the members of my family push the younger generation so hard in terms of academics, because they are relying on the younger generation to change the narrative, and to ensure school and education and safe for all First Nations students. Even in the 1990s as described by McCallum and Milloy, “Aboriginal people valued education as a mediator between the two cultures” [[13]](#footnote-13)

In exploring gender as a category of analysis, while my father, and many of his brothers did not achieve success in the formal education realm, the women in my family succeeded in the sense that some have worked their way through formal higher education completing secondary school, post secondary school, and completing doctorates. My Auntie Verna, always said she always felt quite supported from the family and her communities.[[14]](#footnote-14) Potentially that was from being a Bill C-31 kid. My Kye7e lost her status after marrying my grandpa(who was also First Nations, but his mother did not register him because they lived up in the woods, and could not be found by Indian agents, and she could pass off his heritage as Spanish), so by the time my Kye7e got her status back, and all of her children, it was because of Bill C-31.

This bill resulted in a swelling of the status Indian population. By 2000, over 100,000 women and their children re-gained status representing 17% of the registered Indian population, in relation to that, post-secondary attendance rates of First Nation women regularly doubled those of First Nation men. [[15]](#footnote-15) A correlation to women gaining status, and the rates of women entering post-secondary relate in the fact that women could be sponsored through their First Nation bands, to pay for their schooling. “British Columbia provided targeted support for limited Aboriginal post-secondary programs in the 1970s in response to pressure from aboriginal activists and a desire to curtail unrest.”[[16]](#footnote-16) In response to this, my aunt did disclose that she has felt more supported to attend school for the financial funding she received, she was married at the time with children and he then husband did not support her getting an education. “Alongside the service plan funding, from 2007 to 2010, Gathering Place capital funding supported investment in the creation of a space on campus dedicated to the promotion of Aboriginal culture, tradition, and ceremony to make the campus environment feel more welcoming and relevant to Aboriginal students.”[[17]](#footnote-17) My aunt also discussed her success in attending school with other First Nation girls and women, and how their own communities were established on campus.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In terms of my family and a formal education, a lot of the men struggle, and the women flourish, maybe this has something to do with the matriarchies of the Secwepemc and Nlakapamux cultures, I am not sure. This does not mean the men in my family are not brilliant, but a lot of them did not try to receive a formal education. My father never attended an Indian Residential School, he also did not know English when he started at Cache Creek Elementary, so he endured physical and emotional harm with beatings and verbal abuse at the hands of his teachers and peers. “Peer victimization is associated with increased risk of internalizing behaviours, including school dropout, unemployment, depression, anxiety, and reduced adult achievement and competence.[[19]](#footnote-19) And again, with exploring trauma, my dad was also impacted with his mother, attending Kamloops Indian Residential School until she was 12. I do believe my family has come to the painful decision to succumb to education as a means of taking back our own power, and with my dad, I do believe he now slightly more than before, trusts the education system.

Within the context of historic education in Canada, I solely believe it was social control. With what my Aunt experienced aside from racism in the education sector, was concern. I do believe that while education was controlling, the statistics of First Nations women in education was staggeringly low. Which drives the thought of maybe it was social concern to indigenize education. Then within my family, I would say education for the younger generation is both control and concern. Control in that, the older generations, the ones with poor experiences in education, want the younger generation to attend post secondary to get into education, and to help change the narrative. It is also then looked at as social concern, because there is genuine concern for the future generations, and with the distrust of the education system from the past, maybe the only way the older generation sees anything positive happening is if there are our own people within the system.

 Education for First Nation people meant something entirely different from the rest of those receiving an education in what is now know as Canada. While all education started with control, it seems as years and decades went on, it developed to a cause of concern. It took decades and decades for First Nation children to get the same concerning recognition from officials than what non-Indigenous children received. From starting with religious control, assimilation and colonization, to slowly gaining recognition and respect with policies, provincial and federal aid, First Nation men and women, mostly women in my family, have taken a formal education with an obligation to help change the narrative of First Nation people and education in Canada.

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1. Talking with my dad about his educational experience is incredibly hard on him, therefore, I did not interview him for this assignment, because he is so emotionally taxing on him. All of my conversations with him regarding this assignment have happened much in the past. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rosemary Barnes, and Nina Josefowitz. “Indian Residential Schools in Canada: Persistent Impacts on Aboriginal Students’ Psychological Development and Functioning.” *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne,* July 5, 2018. Doi: 10.1037/cap0000154. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. A. Hiltz "Religion in State Schools of Canada." *Religious Education* 22, (1927): 606. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rosemary Barnes, and Nina Josefowitz. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Neil McDonald, “Egerton Ryerson and the School as an Agent of Political Socialization,” in Sara Burke and Patrice Milewski (Eds.) Schooling in Transition: Readings in the Canadian History of Education, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012: 39-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Anita Olsen Harper, and Shirley Thompson. “Structural Oppressions Facing Indigenous Students in Canadian Education.” *Fourth World Journal* 15, no.2 (Winter 2017): 41-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Allan Roy Dafoe, “Better Citizens Through Stronger Children: LIFE IS MORE AND MORE COMPLEX.” *Vital Speeches of the Day 6*, no. 3 (November 15, 1939): 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Verna Minnabarriet in conversation with author, February, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Karlene, Faith, Mary Gottfriedson, Cherry Joe, Wendy Leonard, and Sharon McIvor. "Native Women in Canada: A Quest for Justice." *Social Justice* 17, no. 3 (41) (1990): 167-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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12. Jean Barman, “School for Inequality: The Education of British Columbia Aboriginal Children,” in Sara Burke and Patrice Milewski (Eds.), *Schooling in Transition: Readings in the Canadian History of Education*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012: 255-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John Sheridan Milloy, and Mary Jane McCallum. *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System*. Vol. Anniversary edition. Critical Studies in Native History. Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Verna Minnabarriet in conversation with author, March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mills and McCreary, 1302. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mills and McCreary, 1304. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Mills and McCreary, 1304. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Verna Minnabarriet in conversation with author, March, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Barnes and Josefowitz, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)