Introduction

The residential school system in Canada was created to assimilate the Aboriginal people into mainstream Canadian society. The system was harmful to the students, for they experienced little to no education, lots of abuse, and were forced to do manual labour to ensure that the school continued to operate. It was also harmful to their communities, for the system created cultural, emotional, and psychological damage that have been passed on to subsequent generations. When analyzed under Paulo Freire’s theory of education, as presented in Pedagogy of Solidarity and Pedagogy of the Oppressed, it is evident that the residential schools were incapable of providing an education that would have allowed for the assimilation of the Aboriginal peoples into mainstream Canadian society. Furthermore, when the assimilative policies are examined under his theories, the education provided would not have allowed for the success of Aboriginal students within the system.

I will first provide a brief overview of Paulo’s Freire’s theory of education. Next, I will provide the history of the residential schools, examining its causes, its operation, and its curriculum, which I will then examine in light of Freire’s theory. Then, I will briefly analyse the positive and negative consequences of the residential school system on its students although the latter will be prioritized. Finally, I will discuss the attempts at creating resolutions and reconciliation, especially on initiatives created by the federal government.
Introduction to Paulo Freire’s Theories

According to Freire, education must address the needs of students. Education is created to deal with humanity’s uncompletedness.¹ He believed that it was important to honour and affirm “the experiences, voices, and beliefs that students brings to the classroom”² which can be done with an awareness of the different histories and cultures within a country.³ He advocates for a democratic way of teaching, where “the teacher makes a sincere effort to teach an object that he or she supposedly already knows, and the students make a sincere effort to learn the object that they do not know yet.”⁴ From this comes the development of respect between the teacher and the student. When one teaches an object, it must be at the “service or something” and must work at the “favour” of someone as a human being.⁵ It is not about transferring techniques from teacher to student.⁶ This is done to create critical minds and to foster “students’ curiosity and creativity.”⁷ As a result of this view, mistakes are seen as an integral part of learning.⁸ Education, to Freire, is done with an awareness of students’ experience and is done with intent of nurturing the students’ minds. This, as we will discuss later, is not always the case.

History of the Residential Schools

The residential school system was created for the purpose of assimilating Aboriginal peoples into mainstream Canadian society. There were more than 130 residential schools throughout seven provinces and two territories. Over 150,000 Aboriginal children attended the

¹ Paulo Freire, Ana Marie Araujo Freire, and Walter de Oliviera, Pedagogy of Solidarity (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014) 18.
² Ibid., 8.
³ Ibid., 26.
⁴ Ibid., 19.
⁵ Ibid., 21.
⁶ Ibid., 23.
⁷ Ibid., 38.
⁸ Ibid., 39.
schools. The system ensured that Aboriginal people would no longer be recognized as distinct peoples within Canadian society. The schools were created to “disestablish [Aboriginal] communities through assimilation.” It was an attempt to civilize and evangelize the Aboriginal people. Despite this, the Aboriginal people were not passive recipients of an educational system. In the treaties made with the government, they requested the inclusion of on-reserve schools that would educate children about how to deal with settler society. However, they did not envision the residential school system. From the Canadian perspective, the schools were not created to meet treaty obligations, but rather to end these obligations through the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples. The aim to assimilate Aboriginal people into mainstream Canadian society was evident in its daily operations and the curriculum.

The schools were run by Churches and the federal government. Specifically, the Catholic, Anglican, United, and Presbyterian Churches, with the help of the federal government, operated the schools. Many of the schools began working with a half-day system, where older students spent half the day performing manual labour. The Churches received a set amount of funds per student that attended their schools; therefore, any shortage of funds meant that the schools increasingly relied on student labour. Religion was a key component in the school
because it was believed that becoming Christian was equivalent to becoming European. The assimilative policies were reinforced in the rules surrounding the residential schools. A new Christian identity was imposed on the students, which included receiving Christianized names. If they had braided hair, it would be cut, destroying its spiritual significance. They were banned from speaking their languages. It was believed that assimilation would occur through the destruction of Aboriginal languages. The Churches’ operation of the residential school system enforced the assimilative policies surrounding its creation.

The curriculum drilled into the Aboriginal students about the inferiority of their cultures and the superiority of the Euro-Canadian culture. Aboriginal children were taught that “Aboriginal people were inferior, savage and uncivilized, and that Aboriginal languages, spiritual beliefs, and ways of life were irrelevant.” They were taught that their cultures were mere superstitions. There was a greater emphasis on religious education as a result of the schools being run by Christian churches and because of the mentality that becoming Canadian meant becoming Christianized first. Additionally, the operation of the classrooms was detrimental to the learning of the Aboriginal peoples. The classrooms were often large and had students of all ages. Teachers relied on memorization and recitation to test students’ knowledge

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18 Canada, They Came for the Children, 26.
20 Canada, They Came for the Children, 22.
21 Ibid, 24.
22 Canada, Report.
23 Canada, They Came for the Children, 3.
24 Canada, Report.
of the material which often focused on how Aboriginal children can become more Canadian so that they can contribute to society.

There was little to no involvement from families in the system. Children were usually taken away from their families to attend the residential schools. In other cases, parents were forced to send their children off to the schools against their wills. This was further reinforced by an amendment to the Indian Act in 1920, which made attendance in residential schools compulsory “for status Indian children between seven and fifteen.” Families were often unaware of what was happening to their children. It was key to educate children away from their families, so that they would be kept from the “evil surroundings” created by their parents, family, and community. It also ensured that there would be little resistance from parents regarding the “radical cultural transformation” that their children would be going through. Familial involvement in the schools (or lack thereof) was also influenced by the schools’ differing policies on family visits. Some schools allowed families to visit children on weekends, while others forbade parents from contacting their children. In other cases, distances and travel costs were too great to allow parents to visit. Some schools were hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from communities. In most cases, familial involvement was discouraged, due to travel inconveniences, potential conflict with curriculum, and the necessity of cultural removal for full assimilation.

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25 Canada, They Came for the Children, 26.
26 Hamilton Diabo, “An Awkward Dance: A View of Aboriginal/Church Relations.”
28 Canada, They Came for the Children, 17.
30 Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Report.
31 Canada, They Came for the Children, 10.
33 Canada, Interim Report, 5.
There was rampant abuse in the residential school system. There was evidence of physical and sexual abuse and neglect occurring in the system. Teachers disciplined students and forced them to undergo harsh punishments. There was evidence of sexual abuse from the very early days of the system and students struggled with having their concerns heard. The perpetrators were those who took advantage of the isolation of the residential schools to abuse the students. There were also students who died while attending, although there are no clear records that indicate the number of children while attending the schools. It is believed that the number of students can reach into the thousands.

Analysis of the Residential School Through Freire’s Theories

The education offered at the residential school system, when examined under Freire’s theories, actually led to the failures of the system. First of all, Freire believed that educators are not to exaggerate their authority. The prevalence of abuse and the deaths run contrary to this condition. The actions of the teachers were detrimental to the system. According to Freire, teachers are supposed to have the responsibility of educating students into becoming more than who they are. However the education provided to Aboriginal students was meant to help them assimilate into the more “superior” Euro-Canadian culture, rather than encouraging and strengthening their own cultures and traditions. It was part of the ongoing colonization of Aboriginal people, meaning that their traditions and cultures were not respected. Freire argues that it is possible to contribute to education in other societies, but one must respect their histories.

34 Canada, They Came for the Children, 42-43.
35 Ibid., 44.
36 Canada, They Came for the Children, 30.
37 Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, Pedagogy of Solidarity, 21-22.
38 Ibid, 8.
to do so.\textsuperscript{40} The educators did not respect Aboriginal histories and portrayed them as inferior compared to the Euro-Canadian culture. One example of this disrespect was the ignorance of how education itself was done in Aboriginal societies, which emphasized an interconnected world through a mixture of teaching, ceremonies, and daily activities.\textsuperscript{41} The residential schools restricted learning to the classrooms and did not incorporate the holistic style of learning that was commonplace in Aboriginal societies. The role of teachers in the residential school system, when analyzed under Freire’s theories, prevented the schools from properly educating students.

Secondly, the residential school system utilized the “banking model of education.” Freire defines this model as education in which “the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits.”\textsuperscript{42} The use of memorization and recitation in the residential schools is a key component in the banking model of education. Recitation and memorization hinders the creation of “critical minds,” and does not challenge students’ curiosity and creativity.\textsuperscript{43} The knowledge taught as part of this model is given by “those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.”\textsuperscript{44} The education in the residential schools being focused on the Euro-Canadian and Christian worldview implied that the knowledge that students had about their Aboriginal worldview was invalid and that they must listen to the educators informing them about this worldview. In other words, it implied that the Aboriginal people knew nothing, while the educators were the knowledgeable ones. The teacher’s role, according to Freire, is to teach children “contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{40} Ibid.
\bibitem{41} Canada, \textit{They Came for the Children}, 8.
\bibitem{43} Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, \textit{Pedagogy of Solidarity}, 38.
\bibitem{44} Freire, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}, 58.
\end{thebibliography}
engendered them and could give them significance.”45 The lack of knowledge taught about Aboriginal cultures or the failure to instruct students using a holistic education rendered the education received in the residential schools irrelevant to their lives. The banking model of education prevents people from becoming “beings for themselves.”46 This model believes that “The educated man is adapted man, because is better ‘fit’ for the world.”47 The aim of the education in the residential schools was to assimilate Aboriginal peoples; in other words, it was to make him “fit” into Euro-Canadian society.

Thirdly, the structure of the residential schools can also be analyzed and critiqued based on Freire’s theories. Freire believed in the involvement of neighbourhoods and communities in the improvement of schools.48 The isolation of the residential schools from the communities that their students belonged to prevented neighbourhoods and communities from being involved in the improvement of the residential school system. For one thing, the schools were way too far, and secondly, it only made families unaware of what was happening in the schools. To Freire, solidarity can lead to social change and that community is needed to create and act on solidarity.49 When the failures of the residential school system were becoming public, the federal government still refused to involve parents and communities in the improvement of the system.50 Without their involvement, Freire would argue that the system’s failure was inevitable. He also believed that students had the right and the duty to be themselves and educators must reinforce this.51 However, the constant portrayal of Aboriginal culture as inferior and banning

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42 Ibid, 57.
43 Ibid, 61.
44 Ibid, 63
45 Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, Pedagogy of Solidarity, 47.
46 Ibid, 78.
47 Canada, They Came for the Children, 19.
48 Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, Pedagogy of Solidarity, 48.
students from speaking their languages or participating in their cultural traditions prevented them from strengthening their identity as Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people often had close ties with the environment as part of their worldview. This was disrupted in the residential school system where isolation and harsh discipline increased students’ levels of stress and left them susceptible to illnesses. According to Freire, stress hinders students’ ability to learn. The deterioration of mental health further limited Aboriginal students’ ability to learn what little material they had been taught in the classrooms. Therefore, the structure of the residential school system itself couldn’t have possibly served to improve and educate its students.

The Success and Failures of the Residential School System

Despite the critiques of the system under Freire’s educational theories, there have been some successes in the residential school system. While assimilation was the overarching goal of the residential school system, there were schools that gave students good experiences. Although they did not attend willingly, the activities that were available, such as sports, arts, reading, dancing, and writing, were ones that students enjoyed. Some students chose to stay to finish their education and formed lifelong relationships with their teachers. Some people have good things to say about their experiences in the residential schools. They believed that their education complemented what they had learned from their parents and community and that they were taught academic skills that they were able to use in the future. Others developed deep Christian faith, as a result of their experiences at the residential school system. Many

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52 Canada, They Came for the Children, 28.
53 Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, Pedagogy of Solidarity, 38.
54 Canada, They Came for the Children, 45.
55 Ibid.
56 Borrows, “Residential Schools, Respect and Responsibilities for Past Harms,” 487.
Aboriginal leaders developed their leadership skills within the residential school system. For example, after Phil Fontaine publicly disclosed his experiences at the residential school system, including the sexual abuse, he inspired other people, such as Garnet Angecomb, to speak out about their own experiences. Garnet Angecomb was able to meet with other survivors of the residential school system as a result of Fontaine’s public disclosure, which then allowed them to seek support from one another.

Nonetheless, the failures of the residential school system far outweigh its successes. It has led to intergenerational trauma within Aboriginal communities. Recall that the system educated students to see their traditions and cultures as evil. As a result, some elders who attended were unable to pass on their communities’ teachings and traditions and parents were unable to raise their own children. Furthermore, students who experienced abuse ran a greater risk of abusing others. The combination of these two factors meant that parents who attended the residential school system and faced abuse are unable to raise their own children, for they were not shown the affection and love that they now need to support their children. This then leads to the “loss of language, loss of families and communities, and loss of self-worth.”

Community and family members, even if they did not attend a residential school, experienced its negative effects. For example, Aboriginal author Richard Wagamese’s family fell apart as a result of the residential school system. His parents and extended family attended residential schools and the trauma that they experienced caused them to turn to alcoholism. As a result of

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58 Canada, They Came for the Children, 58.
59 Rogers et al., Speaking my Truth, 21.
60 Ibid., 24.
61 Jack, Behind Closed Doors, xiv.
62 Canada, They Came for the Children, 45.
63 Rogers et al., Speaking my Truth, 30.
this, Richard and his siblings were taken by Children’s Aid Services.\textsuperscript{64} Richard is one of many children taken away from their families as part of the Sixties Scoop, another consequence that stemmed from the residential school. This occurred in the 1960s and onwards and involved Aboriginal children taken away from their families and adopted into white families; the intent was to Canadianize them.\textsuperscript{65} In these cases, the intergenerational trauma occurs as a result of the lack of solidarity that is required to foster healing. As mentioned in the analysis, solidarity is key in strengthening communities and this can be extended to strengthening families. However, the lack of relationships between families and communities hinders the formation of solidarity to deal with the trauma. As a result, the inability to bond and the inability to heal are passed on from generation to generation.

The goal of assimilation through the system failed and led the students to face risk factors. Many former students found themselves in the “shadows of society” after realizing that they no longer belong in their communities.\textsuperscript{66} Because of this, they faced “risk factors including hunger, loneliness, ridicule, physical and sexual abuse, untimely and unseemly death.”\textsuperscript{67} Half of First Nations children live in poverty today as a result of the schools.\textsuperscript{68} Recall that the system meant to assimilate students into the mainstream society. Ideally, this would mean giving them the opportunity to work towards careers that will help sustain themselves and their families. Children living in poverty as a result of the system illustrates that the aims of the system were not fulfilled. Child apprehensions and youth crime is a result of the residential school system,

\textsuperscript{64} Rogers et al., \textit{Speaking my Truth}, 154-7.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{66} Borrows, “Residential Schools, Respect and Responsibilities for Past Harms,” 487.
\textsuperscript{67} Rogers et al., \textit{Speaking my Truth}, 49.
\textsuperscript{68} Borrows, “Residential Schools, Respect and Responsibilities for Past Harms,” 492.
for children did not have a positive family environment.\textsuperscript{69} Aboriginal people are also overrepresented in Canadian prisons.\textsuperscript{70} Survivors often turn to alcohol to deal with their problems.\textsuperscript{71} The consequences of the residential schools, which lasted for over a century, were passed on through different generations and have contributed to “social problems, poor health and low educational success rates in Aboriginal communities today.”\textsuperscript{72} There are also high mortality and birth rates in Aboriginal communities.\textsuperscript{73} The failure to assimilate Aboriginal youth (or just to provide them a good education) left them susceptible to dangerous and difficult situations.

The effects of the system were evident even as it was running. In 1908, the Minister of Indian Affairs stated that “the Indian cannot go out from school, making his own way and compete with the white man . . . He has not the physical, mental, or moral get-up to enable him to compete.”\textsuperscript{74} This is a consequence of the banking model of education, which “directly or indirectly reinforces men’s fatalistic perception of their situation.”\textsuperscript{75} The failures of the system became more evident as survivors spoke out about their experiences. Freire argues that one’s experiences in school affect one’s customs and mental life.\textsuperscript{76} The loss of traditions and cultures, communities and families is a result of the system. He also believed that education is meant to transform one’s reality in a hopeful manner.\textsuperscript{77} For most survivors, the education they received and the environment that they lived in led to trauma, rather than hope. Despite knowing that the system was already failing, the government and those who ran the school did nothing to improve

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{69} Canada, \textit{Interim Report}, 7.
\bibitem{70} LeBeuf, \textit{The Role of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police}, 31.
\bibitem{71} Rogers et al., \textit{Speaking my Truth}, 16.
\bibitem{72} Canada, \textit{Interim Report}, 1.
\bibitem{73} Ibid., 7.
\bibitem{74} Canada, \textit{They Came for the Children}, 25.
\bibitem{75} Freire, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}, 73.
\bibitem{76} Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, \textit{Pedagogy of Solidarity}, 66.
\bibitem{77} Borrows, “Residential Schools, Respect and Responsibilities for Past Harms,” 497.
\end{thebibliography}
it. This goes directly against Freire’s belief in humanization, for he believes that it can only be achieved through a struggle to change one’s reality, rather than adapting to it. The schools forced students to adapt to the environment of neglect and abuse and they were unable to struggle to change their reality, for they were not allowed to form bonds with one another. Thus, the system continued to run and the trauma resulting from this continues to affect communities today.

**Attempts at Resolution, Reconciliation, and Healing**

There have been attempts on the federal government’s part to resolve the harms created by the residential schools. In 1998, the Canadian government formally recognized the harms it committed throughout its history and interactions with the Aboriginal people. Jane Stewart, then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, delivered a Statement of Reconciliation, as part of the unveiling a new policy, titled “Gathering Strength: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan.” This is an attempt to acknowledge the past and move towards a future that sees a “new partnership with Aboriginal people.” The Aboriginal Healing Foundation was also established in 1998. They received a grant of $350 million, which was meant to address the “legacy of sexual, physical, mental, spiritual, and cultural abuse.” Apologies have also been issued by the Churches involved with the residential school system. Since the mid-1990s, thousands of former students filed civil lawsuits against the churches that ran the school and the federal government. These lawsuits “sought compensation for the injuries that individuals had sustained.

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78 Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, *Pedagogy of Solidarity*, 42.
80 Ibid.
82 Rogers et al., *Speaking my Truth*, 231.
and for loss of language and culture.” Many of these lawsuits were resolved with the creation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, “the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history.” It is meant to repair the harms caused by the residential school system. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created as part of this agreement. This Commission addressed the harms of the residential schools system, provided space to survivors who choose to speak about their experiences, support these survivors, educate the public, and to remember the former students and their families. However, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement excludes former students who attended schools that were not covered by the agreement. Finally, on June 21, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered an apology to the residential school survivors, which recognized that the schools intended to remove children from their communities for the purpose of assimilating them into the mainstream Canadian culture.

Freire’s theories can also be applied to examine how healing can be facilitated, in light of these actions:

To accept that the future is a possibility, implies that there are different possibilities for the future and that we have to realize that we have to mobilize ourselves to organize ourselves in order to dream. The conceptualization of future as a possibility brings the idea that the future is not something beyond our capability to influence, some entity waiting for us to arrive. On the contrary, according to this profile of its being a possibility, the future is nothing but transformation – the transformation of today.

There is a need to keep working at transforming today, so that the mistakes of the past will not be repeated in the future. These actions reflect a desire by the Canadian public to transform

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83 Canada, Interim Report, 1.
84 Nagy and Sehdev, “Residential Schools and Decolonization,” 68.
85 Canada, Interim Report, 9.
86 Canada, They Came for the Children, 2.
87 Ibid, 51.
Canadian society. Freire believes in becoming aware of the cultures that one gets involved in. As such, there is also a need to become aware of how healing is facilitated in Aboriginal cultures, so that healing can be done in a way that will benefit the Aboriginal people who were affected by the system. Using purely Euro-Canadian ways of dealing with the trauma will repeat the mistakes made in the residential school system, for it means ignoring the cultures and traditions of the Aboriginal people. Solidarity is key in ensuring this. It must be an ingrained value in everything that is done to remedy the harms committed as part of the system.\footnote{Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, Pedagogy of Solidarity, 44.} A desire to be in solidarity with the Aboriginal people can further encourage reconciliation. This solidarity is evident in the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which recently concluded. The Commission has published their findings and recommendations in light of these conversations. They have also published survivors’ stories, which details their experiences within and after attending the schools.\footnote{Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “TRC findings,” http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890.} Despite this, work needs to be done to continue to ensure that the harms suffered in the residential school system are not repeated.

The residential school did not have an environment that allowed for the success of Aboriginal students within the system. Its education, which focused on religious assimilation, and the use of the banking model of education, prevented the success of the Aboriginal students. The attempt to assimilate them into mainstream Canadian society failed, as Aboriginal students found themselves suffering from poverty and other risk factors. They also struggled upon their return to their communities, finding themselves unable to belong. The damages of the residential school system highlight the dangers of harmful education (and, simultaneously, makes clear the necessity of healthy education) within a society. To Paulo Freire:

\footnote{Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, Pedagogy of Solidarity, 44.}
Education is an epiphenomenon, a reflection of the cultural, social, and political through interpersonal relationships, communities, and institutions. Education is thus a transforming agent of these structures. It is not a neutral activity, but a territory of development and mobilization where intense clashes and conflicts are experienced.\(^{90}\)

The creation of the residential school system reflects the Canadian government’s desire to assimilate Aboriginal people into mainstream society, a desire that had continue to increase ever since the beginning of their colonization. However, education can be used to transform this reality. Education is needed to continue to inform Canadians about the residential school system. Curriculums need to be updated to ensure that students are being taught about this dark part of Canadian history and teachers need to be educated on how to handle this topic in a sensitive manner. Education is also needed by the various levels of government in Canada, to ensure that they are aware of the cultures and traditions of the Aboriginal people. This would allow them to know the proper ways of helping further the process of healing and reconciliation from the impacts of the residential school system, and to ensure proper representation in future endeavours. Just as education was used in an attempt to destroy the Aboriginal people as distinct people within Canadian society, it can also be used to renew and reform a relationship with them.

\(^{90}\) Freire, Araujo Freire, and de Oliveira, *Pedagogy of Solidarity*, 66.
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