

VISUALIZING CANADA'S INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday, June 11, 2008, in front of the House of Commons and an added circle of eleven chairs, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology. In the chairs were five Aboriginal leaders and six residential school survivors, each considered a guest of honour for this remarkable event. The apology was for the Indian Residential School system and the damage it caused to Aboriginal children, their families, and their culture. The apology, given by Harper on behalf of the federal government, was long overdue:

"Today, we recognize that [Canada's historic] policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a Government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly." (Harper, 2008)

Beginning long before Confederation in 1867, Canada's residential school system was primarily active following the approval of the Indian Act in 1876. "An education system in name only for much of its existence," (Truth and Reconciliation Canada, 2015, v) the system was made up of one hundred and thirty-two federally supported institutions¹, the last of which closed in 1996. The system removed an estimated 150,000 Aboriginal children from their families, their homes, and their communities in every Canadian province and territory, except Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, and New Brunswick. The schools were funded by the federal government, while day-to-day operations at a majority of schools were the responsibility of various religious groups, including the Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, and United churches.

GOALS

In recent years, in light of official apologies issued by the Government of Canada, individual provinces and territories, and religious institutions, and with the help of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (NTRC), information and details regarding the schools and their students' welfare have begun to enter public knowledge. These details include school-by-school demographics, accounts of physical and sexual abuse, reports of malnourishment and poor living conditions, and descriptions of punishment and assimilation policies. This information comes from a plethora of original, historical documents kept by the government and the church, digitized by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) and made available in their archives.

This data, while digitally published by the NCTR and NTRC, is difficult to access and in many cases, even more difficult to understand. This project aims to bring this knowledge to life, making the data and its story tangible by visually investigating the IRS system. The visualization begins with the narrative of a single school, its student demographics, policies, everyday life, and management, and how they change over the school's lifetime. It continues by looking at the larger network geographically (i.e. where the schools were located in relation to urban centres, native reservations, and "white" schools, as well as where their students came from). Finally, school data is analyzed in a purely qualitative sense, incorporating the personal stories and accounts of survivors, as well as the NCTR, NTRC, and Canadian government's steps towards reconciliation. This process involves synthesizing the various resources, documentation, and data sources listed below, both qualitative and quantitative, to tell the story of Indian Residential Schools.

AUDIENCE

This project is aimed at various audiences. While many Canadians are aware of this part of Canada's past, most are unaware of its immensity. For them, the general population, the project serves as a way to easily and intuitively learn more, and also relate better to the information presented by the NTRC and understand

the progress of the commission's attempts at reconciliation. The residential school system is slowly being introduced to primary and secondary school curriculums, so for educators, the project can serve as a valuable tool for teaching. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the visualization can work for First Nations peoples looking to qualify and quantify their experiences and those of their ancestors, while also working to help continue the tradition of passing down stories and knowledge to future generations. The final visualization will be available in various mediums, including large screen format for incorporation into the NCTR's archives and exhibitions, tablet format for researchers and educators, and in print for classroom use and those without computer access.

DATA

To fully understand the IRS system and present it in a form appropriate to the topic, both quantitative and qualitative data must be considered. While quantitative data, like numbers, statistics, and geographic data, can help create complex and informative charts, the real comprehension and appreciation of the IRS system lie within the qualitative data: the stories and personal accounts of its survivors. This kind of data is more difficult to present and will be treated with the highest level of respect. The project makes use of both data types to tell the stories of the schools. A general outline of this data is listed below.

Quantitative data includes: - School-by-school data - Enrolment, student age and sex, and student base - Locations, names, and facilities - Administration - Funding and operation - Government and church data - Reservation data - Sizes, borders, and locations - Populations - Treaties - Reconciliation data - Payments

Qualitative data includes: - Personal stories and accounts - School-by-school data - Policies - Buildings - Abuse reports - Reservation data - Treaties - Reconciliation data - Apologies - NTRC recommendations

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Data sources include the reports of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the digital and physical archives of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, Statistics Canada surveys and censuses, voluntarily provided reports from the Catholic Church, and primary and secondary sources containing personal stories.

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1. As recognized by the federal government.