

Resilience in Adversity: Systemic Oppression of Deaf and Indigenous Youth

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Throughout the 20th century, over 150,000 Indigenous children were ripped out of their homes and segregated into residential schools across Canada (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation). For over 150 years, these children were stripped of their culture, forced into inhuman living conditions and were victims of mental, physical, and sexual abuse perpetrated by the very people responsible for protecting them (MacDonald 430). Although this forced segregation of Indigenous youth is described as “the worst [Canada] had to offer” (Kinew), unfortunately residential schools only make up one chapter of the horrors imposed upon Canadian minorities. Similar to the experiences of Indigenous youth, throughout the twentieth century, thousands of Deaf children were placed in Deaf schools, where many students experienced atrocious experiences of abuse, segregation, and discrimination. These students were isolated from their own families and communities, and then oppressed for their Deafness. Evidently, the Canadian government failed to protect its own youth and hurled its most vulnerable populations into many decades of intergenerational trauma (Baxter v. Canada). This paper explores the lived experiences of Deaf and Indigenous youth in various institutions throughout Canada, demonstrating the resilience of minority communities despite the government’s failures in protecting them.

Resilience Within Indigenous Communities

Since 1821, there have been over 75,000 abuse victims and 3,200 confirmed deaths of Indigenous children (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). The main purpose of the residential school system was to eradicate Indigenous communities by forcibly re-educating their children and extinguishing their cultural identity, inadvertently assimilating them into Western society. Schools aimed to “[drive] the native out of the child”, essentially “obliterating Aboriginal languages, traditions and beliefs” by ostracizing Indigenous children and leaving them ashamed

of their own culture (Baxter). Children, as young as four years old, were “kidnapped” and isolated from their families, and then abused by their very own caregivers. In the landmark court case, *Baxter v. Canada*, it is stated that Indigenous children suffered abuse including “being beaten, strapped, chained” and many were victims of “voyeurism and fondling, oral, vaginal and anal intercourse, and sometimes pregnancy and forced abortions” by school staff members (2006). Court documents establish that although the federal government was aware of these atrocities, no action was taken to protect Indigenous children. Whether it was systemic neglect or heinous ignorance, Canada evidently failed in its responsibility to protect its children. The horrors of residential schools continue to plague communities through decades of intergenerational trauma and the loss of language, culture, and knowledge.

However, despite centuries of oppression and abuse, Indigenous communities continue to show courage as they work towards recovery, while still embracing Western civilization with forgiveness. Wab Kinew, the premier of Manitoba, describes how forgiving the descendants of their tormentors is the lens through which he wants Indigenous people to move forward, fostering good relationships and striving for peace instead of vengeance (2018). Kinew talks about how his father “held his head high and eventually found peace on a personal level by practicing [his] culture” (2018), illustrating how Indigenous communities have always placed a great emphasis on promoting resilience and forgiveness (Stout). Since the last residential school closed in 1996, over 15,000 lawsuits were filed by residential school survivors, and in early 2006, the *Baxter* lawsuit, representing 86,000 survivors, was settled for over \$4,000,000,000 (Baxter). Since then, Indigenous communities have worked towards similar settlements that have negotiated payments of over \$3,000,000,000 towards establishing organizations that work towards reviving Indigenous culture (Gottfriedson). Despite the cultural eradication and

intergenerational abuse committed in residential schools, Indigenous communities continue to move forward with strength and resilience, working towards recovering their culture and preserving their languages.

Resilience Within Deaf Communities

In the 1900s, Deaf boarding schools were established throughout the country with the intent of creating a safe space for Deaf students. Unfortunately, many of these institutions were founded without proper guardrails; for instance, at the Ross Macdonald School, students felt isolated and restricted from the outside world and “[supervisors] did not know how to work with students with disabilities” (Seed). Over time, with the lack of supervision and communication, many of these schools fell victim to systemic negligence and were no longer safe residences for students. In the Jericho School for the Deaf in British Columbia, “many investigations by the provincial Ombudsman... established that sexual, physical and emotional abuse of students by staff and peers took place” (Rumley). Similarly, many Deaf residential schools in Ontario and Quebec reported similar stories of abusive, oppressive, and discriminatory conduct by caretakers and staff (Welsh). Children who are deaf, such as the abuse victims at Jericho Hill, get little or no sex education, and often “do not know that it is wrong for an adult to... initiate sexual relations with them” (Vernon 30). Furthermore, most Deaf students could not communicate in spoken language, and no officers could communicate with the abuse victims claiming abuse (Ombudsman 5). Once again, the Canadian government failed in its responsibility to protect its children, but the real tragedy is that so many children were abused in the very settings that were established to serve them (Vernon 32).

However, despite the vulnerability of the Deaf community and the decades of endured abuse, Deaf communities continue to show strength and resilience. Through establishing a shared

language and fostering open communication between Deaf individuals, many victims used peer socialization in their process towards resiliency (Johnson 322). These individuals “[describe] the Deaf community as a resource that can support healthy identity development and positive self-regard” and continue to use cultural practices to build individual and community resilience (Johnson 322). In 2004, 350 students from the Jericho Hill School for the Deaf settled a lawsuit against the government of British Columbia, paying over \$10,000,000 to abuse victims and establishing the BC Deaf Scholarship Trust to foster positive Deaf education throughout the province (BC Deaf Scholarship Trust). Deaf schools in Ontario settled similar class action lawsuits and founded various organizations towards preventing child abuse and improving Deaf education in Canada. Deaf communities throughout Canada demonstrated resiliency and courage, fighting against the government’s ignorance and negligence, while ensuring brighter futures for generations to come.

Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Throughout the twentieth century, the Canadian government failed to protect its own children, and its negligence towards its most vulnerable populations hurt millions of families throughout the country. The endurance and commitment of these communities are true symbols of resilience, and their efforts for reconciliation continue to unlock tremendous contributions to Canada (Kinew). Despite the injustices and atrocities committed against the Deaf and Indigenous communities, these minorities continue forward with courage and strength, and they work towards recovering their cultures and brightening our futures.

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