

hear them. “When we’d go up in the dormitories in the evening I had a friend from Sarnia who I could talk with.”²⁷⁶

Many of the students came to the school fluent in an Aboriginal language, with little or no understanding of French or English. This trend continued well into the post-war period. For these children, the first few months in the school were disorienting and frightening. Arthur McKay arrived at the Sandy Bay, Manitoba, school in the early 1940s with no knowledge of English. “They told me not to speak my language and everything, so I always pretended to be asleep at my desk so they wouldn’t ask me anything.”²⁷⁷ Peter Nakogee recalled being punished for writing in his notebook in Cree syllabics at the Fort Albany, Ontario, school.²⁷⁸

Meeka Alivaktuk came to the Pangnirtung school in what is now Nunavut with no knowledge of English. When she failed to obey an instruction because she did not understand it, she was slapped on the hands. “That’s how my education began.”²⁷⁹ On his first day of school in Pangnirtung, the teacher overheard Sam Kautainuk speaking to a friend in Inuktitut. “He took a ruler and grabbed my head like this and then smacked me in the mouth with the ruler four times.”²⁸⁰

At the Qu’Appelle school in the mid-1960s, Greg Rainville said, he was punished for failing to carry out instructions given to him in a language he did not understand. “The nuns would get frustrated with you when they talked to you in French or English, and you’re not knowing what they’re talking about, and you’re pulled around by the ear.”²⁸¹ At the Shubenacadie school, a staff member once caught William Herney speaking Mi’kmaq with his brother. She strapped him and then washed his mouth out with soap.²⁸² Alphonsine McNeely underwent the same punishment at the Roman Catholic school at Aklavik in the 1940s.²⁸³ Pierrette Benjamin said she was forced to eat soap at the La Tuque school. “The principal, she put it in my mouth, and she said, ‘Eat it, eat it.’”²⁸⁴

The language policy disrupted families. When John Kistabish left the Amos, Québec, school, he could no longer speak Algonquin, and his parents could not speak French, the language that he had been taught in the school. As a result, he found it almost impossible to communicate with them about the abuse he experienced at the school. “I had tried to talk with my parents, and, no, it didn’t work.... We were well anyway because I knew that they were my parents, when I left the residential school, but the communication wasn’t there.”²⁸⁵

Culture was attacked as well as language. In his memoirs, Stoney Chief John Snow tells of how at the Morley, Alberta, school, the “education consisted of nothing that had any relationship to our homes and culture. Indeed Stoney culture was condemned explicitly and implicitly.” He recalled being taught that the only good people on earth were non-Indians and, specifically, white Christians.²⁸⁶ Andrew Bull Calf recalled that at the residential school in Cardston, Alberta, students were not only punished for speaking their own languages, but they also were discouraged from participating in traditional cultural activities.²⁸⁷ Evelyn Kelman recalled that the principal at the Brocket, Alberta, school warned