

actually wear shoes, we wore moccasins. And so our identity was immediately taken away when we entered those schools.³⁷

In addition to the emotional and psychological damage they inflicted, one of the most far-reaching and devastating legacies of residential schools has been their impact on the educational and economic success of Aboriginal people. The lack of role models and mentors, insufficient funds for the schools, inadequate teachers, and unsuitable curricula generally taught in a foreign language—and sometimes by teachers who were also not proficient in the language of instruction—have all contributed to dismal success rates for Aboriginal education. These conditions were compounded for many students by the challenges of trying to learn in environments rendered traumatic by homesickness, hunger, fear, abuse, and institutionalized helplessness. The Commission has heard many examples of students who attended residential school for eight or more years, but left with nothing more than Grade Three achievement, and sometimes without even the ability to read. According to Indian Affairs annual reports, in the 1950s, only half of each year's enrolment got to Grade Six.³⁸

Poor educational achievement has led to the chronic unemployment or under-employment, poverty, poor housing, substance abuse, family violence, and ill health that many former students of the schools have suffered as adults. Although educational success rates are slowly improving, Aboriginal Canadians still have dramatically lower educational and economic achievements than other Canadians.

Education is a fundamental human and Aboriginal right, guaranteed in Treaties, in international law, and in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In particular, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* contains a powerful statement on the right to education under community control. The *Declaration* states, "Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning."³⁹ The Commission believes that fulfilling the promise of the *Declaration* will be key to overcoming the legacy of the residential schools.

Education and the income gap

It is not surprising that, faced with terrible conditions and mostly ineffective teaching, many students left school as soon as they could. A 2010 study of Aboriginal parents and children living off reserves found that the high school completion rate is lower for former residential school students (28%) than for those who did not attend (36%).⁴⁰ Only 7% of the parents who attended residential school have obtained a university degree, compared with 10% for those Aboriginal parents who had never attended these institutions.⁴¹

Although secondary school graduation rates for all Aboriginal people have improved since the closure of the schools, considerable gaps remain when compared with the rates