

schools as well as other challenges faced by Aboriginal people. In addition to fair and adequate funding, there is also a need to maximize Aboriginal control over Aboriginal education, and to facilitate instruction in Aboriginal cultures and languages. These educational measures will offer a realistic prospect of reconciliation on the basis of equality and respect.

Language and culture

In a study of the impact of residential schools, the Assembly of First Nations noted in 1994 that

language is necessary to define and maintain a world view. For this reason, some First Nation elders to this day will say that knowing or learning the native language is basic to any deep understanding of a First Nation way of life, to being a First Nation person. For them, a First Nation world is quite simply not possible without its own language. For them, the impact of residential school silencing their language is equivalent to a residential school silencing their world.⁷⁶

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples similarly noted the connection between Aboriginal languages and what it called a “distinctive world view, rooted in the stories of ancestors and the environment.” The Royal Commission added that Aboriginal languages are a “tangible emblem of group identity” that can provide “the individual a sense of security and continuity with the past ... maintenance of the language and group identity has both a social-emotional and a spiritual purpose.”⁷⁷

Residential schools were a systematic, government-sponsored attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and languages and to assimilate Aboriginal peoples so that they no longer existed as distinct peoples. English and, to a far lesser degree, French were the only languages permitted to be used in most schools. Students were punished—often severely—for speaking their own languages. Michael Sillett, a former student at the North West River residential school in Newfoundland and Labrador, told the Commission, “Children at the dorm were not allowed to speak their mother tongue. I remember several times when other children were slapped or had their mouths washed out for speaking their mother tongue; whether it was Inuktitut or Innu-aimun. Residents were admonished for just being Native.”⁷⁸ As late as the 1970s, students at schools in northwestern Ontario were not allowed to speak their language if they were in the presence of a staff member who could not understand that language.⁷⁹ Conrad Burns, whose father attended the Prince Albert school, named this policy for what it was: “It was a cultural genocide. People were beaten for their language, people were beaten because ... they followed their own ways.”⁸⁰

Rights to culture and language, and the need for remedies for their loss, have long been recognized in international law.⁸¹ They are specifically acknowledged in the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which has recognized the critical state of