

# **Public Inquiries, Political Tensions, And Settler-Canadian Perception**

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## **Abstract.**

There have been several key publications over the last 50 years related to Indigenous education in Canada. Among these, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) report (1996) and the Truth and Reconciliation (2015) report are considered momentous for their attention to the socio-historical and socio-political implications of colonial education paradigms imposed upon Indigenous peoples after first contact. Both the RCAP and TRC reports cite specific recommendations and calls to action for the settler-peoples of Canada to reform current education practices that better reflect and meaningfully include Indigenous histories, knowledges, and traditions across the respective provincial curriculums in Canada. Among other objectives, the intent is to educate non-Indigenous students about the dark legacy of church-operated residential schools and the oppressive policies of assimilation and cultural genocide. This presentation will discuss, among other considerations, the 2018 decision by one provincial Ministry of Education in Canada (legislated by the Ontario Conservative government) to cancel curriculum writing sessions meant to infuse Indigenous content and history into the Ontario school curriculum, as per the recommendations of the aforementioned public inquiries and commissions.

**Keywords:** Commissions, Public Inquiries, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples

## **1. Introduction**

The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) report brought the significance of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to the fore of Canadian consciousness. For some, the Recommendations of the RCAP report represented an opportunity for Canada to revisit and redefine their relationships with Indigenous peoples across all sectors of society (TRC, vol.6). The RCAP report advocated for fundamental changes to colonial socio-political orders and processes established by the settler-nation of Canada grounded predominantly in policies of assimilation (McGregor, 2011; RCAP, 1996). Nearly twenty years later, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) 2015 report underscored, in its recommendations, the necessity for reconciliation across Canada in order to acknowledge and honour Indigenous peoples' self-determination as autonomous peoples. Similar to the discourse in the 1996 RCAP report, the Final Report of the TRC (2015) suggested that an outcome of the comprehensive and extensive inquiry is the opportunity for Canada to re-imagine itself by taking significant actions to address the intergenerational injustices experienced by Indigenous peoples as a result of government-funded and church-operated residential schools (Rymhs, 2006).

## **2. Context**

Of significance to this analysis is the fact that both the RCAP and TRC stated clear recommendations and calls to action respectively in the context of education. Gathering Strength (volume 3) of the 1996 RCAP report cites the fact that control over the education of their children has been of historical concern for Indigenous peoples, including their expectation that education “serve as a vehicle for cultural and economic renewal” (p. 405). The report provides the historical background of how Europeans indoctrinated Indigenous children into Eurocentric and Christian worldviews through formal education. This volume also provides a synopsis of twenty-two reports on Indigenous education (published between 1996 and 1992) that recommended, among other things, the development of specific courses of study related to Indigenous peoples and worldviews that include historical, linguistic, and cultural perspectives. As stated in the report, “what we find most disturbing is that the issues raised at our hearings and in interveners’ briefs are the same concerns that Aboriginal people have been bringing forward since the first studies were done” (p.411). The report includes observations that first, Indigenous people have been significantly limited in their ability to implement the necessary curricula that would allow for the transmission of their linguistic and socio-cultural traditions, and that second, financial resources to remedy the oppressive education policies of the past have not been nearly adequate. Considering these observations and in combination with Indigenous peoples’ paradigms of education as lifelong and holistic endeavours, the RCAP formally recommended that,

Federal, provincial and territorial governments collaborate with Aboriginal governments, organizations and educators to develop or continue developing innovative curricula that reflect Aboriginal cultures and community realities, for delivery (a) at all grade levels of elementary and secondary schools; (b) in schools operating under Aboriginal control; and (c) in schools under provincial or territorial jurisdiction (Rec. 3.5.5; 1996; p.431).

The 2015 TRC report may in fact invest even greater attention to education than the RCAP. It discusses, at great length, the colonial governments’ policy of cultural genocide embodied in residential schools and its horrifying consequences on the transmission of Indigenous peoples’ linguistic, cultural, spiritual, and epistemic traditions (TRC, 2015; vol.1). This same volume addresses the adverse implications that the genocidal policies and practices had on Indigenous peoples’ identities. Established in 2008, the TRC report documents the activities in which the Commission engaged under the broader terms of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, including holding National Events, examining documents and first-hand testimonials of residential school survivors, and ultimately, the issuing of a report and recommendations. As a component of its mandate, the TRC educated the Canadian public about the legacy of residential schools, including their “history, purpose, operation and supervision” from historical and contemporary points of view (TRC, 2015; vol.1, p.43). Included in the report are the troubling testimonials shared by survivors of the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse they experienced during their residential school education. Clear across the voices is the fact that Indigenous language and culture was not tolerated and served as reason for the infliction of corporal punishment for those students that refused to comply. The “Commission is convinced that genuine reconciliation will not be possible until the complex legacy of the schools is understood, acknowledged, and addressed” (vol.1, p.136). In addition, the Commission cited the statement from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as it pertains to Indigenous peoples’ right to establish and control education. The TRC report cites three major reports (since

2011) that called for revisions to school curriculum that include culturally relevant perspectives and a more stable funding allowance to oversee these revisions. Hence, the TRC's respective Calls to Action in the context of education for reconciliation include the following:

We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to: (i) Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students. (Rec. 62,1; 2015)

Across both the RCAP and TRC reports, therefore, are references to other documents and inquiries, as there is a remarkable similarity in the extensive coverage of the implications of the historical context of education after first contact. Moreover, both reports offer a targeted and thoughtful focus on reforming formal education courses and school curriculum to reflect the socio-political, historical, and linguistic traditions of Indigenous peoples in order to reconcile the gross injustices that have contributed to Canada's dark legacy of relations.

### **3. Discussion**

It has been suggested for some time that national public inquiries are significant for both their content and form (see, for example, Ashforth, 1990). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) was, in one respect, an attempt to strengthen the nation-to-nation relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada (Institute on Governance, 2015). Others have noted that public inquiries like the RCAP and Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) assume a symbolic national importance that transcends form and content to address historical and political injustices imposed upon Indigenous peoples (Henderson & Wakeham, 2009; Hughes, 2012). The TRC, sharing the broad scope of the RCAP nineteen years later, is symbolic of Canada's willingness to account for the legacy of residential schools and to represent an intent to establish a new and different relationship with Indigenous peoples, despite the fact that the colonial political and social institutions of the country remain unchanged (Hayner, 2010; Weiss, 2015; Wilson, 2001). One might assume, then, that the nation's commitment to fund and support such public inquiries and commissions are meant to further reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and to enact specific actions to address the historical and contemporary wrongdoings. It is understanding reconciliation as involving,

Not only a recognition of historic benefit and privilege but also concrete measures to rectify wrongs and to achieve equilibrium in current relations of power. This is not to imply that Indigenous justice is dependent upon settler Canadians; that would be a rather re-colonizing message. The aim, rather, as Paulette Regan (2010) has argued, is to consider residential schools as a settler problem and not an 'Indian problem.' Taking responsibility for reconciliation, on this view, necessitates cultural, epistemological, political and material shifts on the part of settler Canadians, a decolonization of relationships. (Nagy, 2012, p. 351)

In this way, reconciliation and healing are representative of both emotional and political objectives (see Martin, 2009).

Evidently, therefore, such public inquiries and commissions imply a heavy socio-political toll (not to mention financial) on the consciousness of a nation. Yet, some scholars argue that the findings, testimonials, recommendations, and calls to action that stem from these comprehensive inquiries is not necessarily enough to significantly alter the perceptions of settler Canadians since they are culturally and emotionally anchored to colonial truths, values, and beliefs (see Davis et al., 2017; Simpson, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2007). These critical perspectives may help to explain the mainstream complacency to enact sweeping and meaningful change to education and curriculum (Csontos, 2019), despite the fact that Indigenous people have called for widespread reforms to education to impact the learning of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in publicly-funded classrooms for an extended period of time. Peoples' perceptions and the public consciousness of a settler-nation are indeed very difficult to influence, despite the stark historical records and compelling testimonials of marginalized and oppressed Indigenous students and communities. The process of altering Canadian consciousness to fully grasp the enormity of the historical and contemporary inequities that challenge Indigenous peoples is highly intricate and inevitably difficult (Dion, 2009).

Nevertheless, the public inquiries and national commissions are meant to demystify the complexity of the decolonization process. The effort and energy invested in educating Canadians of Indigenous peoples' colonial and post-colonial realities are intended to cultivate their sense of social responsibility to better assess issues of power and political inequity. Yet, despite the reports already discussed, as recent as 2018 political decisions to undermine these efforts are being made. In June (2018), the Conservative government of Ontario (Canada) abruptly cancelled a strategic province-wide writing project to revise and update provincial curriculum documents with Indigenous worldviews and content. Sessions were planned to gather Indigenous educators from across the province to infuse the unique contributions, histories, traditions, and cultures of Indigenous peoples into a revised curriculum for all students (an initiative of the former Ontario Liberal government). The revisions were to be in direct response to the TRC's Calls to Action (62 & 63), that included culturally informed teaching about the legacy of residential schools. A statement by the then Minister of Education – Lisa Thompson – indicated that the decision was a result of Premier Doug Ford's promise to Ontarians to operate a fiscally-responsible government: "In keeping with the commitment Premier Doug Ford make to run government more efficiently, all ministries will seek to carry out initiatives in the most cost-effective way possible" (CBC News; July, 2019).

It is of little surprise, thus, that initiatives meant to shift Canadian consciousness and public perception are all too often met with resistance and eventual indifference. Unilateral political decisions like the example cited above from the Ontario Conservative government serve to stifle meaningful encounters for non-Indigenous students to learn about culturally relevant and culturally sensitive Indigenous knowledge. This is to deny children and adolescent learners across the province of powerful opportunities to engage with Indigenous histories and traditions, and contribute pertinent, culturally appropriate and accurate perceptions to their assumptions and preconceived beliefs. By embedding the legacy of residential schools as a meaningful component of the provincial curriculum (and not merely as an aside to Eurocentric chronicles of pre- and post-colonial Canadian history), non-Indigenous students can discuss the implications of their learning in socially supportive environments through a variety of critical discourses (Cherubini, 2012; 2011). Responding to the Calls to Action (not to mention the recommendations of the RCAP nearly twenty years earlier), would represent the mainstream government's commitment to significantly advance the principles of reconciliation through education, by supporting students' understanding and

perspective through authentically rich learning materials. Otherwise, governmental actions to cancel those and other initiatives as cost-cutting measures reflected the historic lack of commitment to enacting meaningful change and “risk further entrenching colonial relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples” (Davis et al., 2017; p 406-407). Such decisions may inadvertently (or perhaps advertently) contribute to the sense of resistance in the Canadian consciousness to devote effort into the contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples. The lack of any substantial action on the part of mainstream governments is detrimental to advancing the critical considerations related to education reform discussed in this paper.

The public inquiries, reports, and commissions have declared education as an immediate and pressing priority for Indigenous people, identified courses of action for settler-Canadians, governments, and institutions. The historical contexts of these documents clearly distinguish colonizers’ dubious contributions to creating oppressive conditions for Indigenous learners and communities, and the legacy of these actions on contemporary times. These endeavours, sanctioned by mainstream governments, invite Canadians to revisit and possibly reconsider their perceptions of Indigenous history and people. Moreover, they challenge the Canadian consciousness to respect the value of Indigenous epistemologies, give attention to the recommendations, and then act on the changes at the peril of sustaining merely symbolic relationships. Least helpful to the process of decolonization are the decisions by government and policy makers to silence the voices of change.

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