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# Disordered dependencies: The impact of language loss and residential schooling on Indigenous peoples

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper I utilise my firsthand experience of residential school to illustrate the impact of colonization, specifically loss of language, on the Indigenous peoples of Canada. The highly complex role of language is explored on both cultural and spiritual levels. This examination, in relation to historical context, allows pertinent observations to be drawn regarding the current state of affairs for Canadian Indigenous people.

## Introduction

Many similarities and differences may exist between Indigenous populations worldwide. In this article, I speak specifically of the Canadian Indigenous experience. The term 'life force' is used to describe the Canadian Indigenous people's connection to their Creator; to their relationships with the plants, animals, the cosmos, all of humankind; to the face-to-face interaction of people within a family and extended family; and the world of intimacy and friendship. In Indigenous societies, 'life force' encompasses everything: the child's birth in the home; the raising and socialization of children; the teaching of relationships, ceremonies, traditions, and rites of passage; the world of work; and total immersion in the rhythms of the seasons. The Indigenous worldview is clearly distinctive and ordered in a circular pattern of interrelated parts, the whole being greater than the sum of these parts. Societies were set up in that model and the remnants of this worldview still remains today in Canadian Indigenous culture.

Rupert Röss, in his book *Return to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* (1996) quotes Basil Johnson who speaks of the Ojibway hierarchy of Creation in *Ojibway Heritage*. He writes: It is not based on intelligence or beauty or strength or numbers. Instead, it is based on dependencies. It

places Mother Earth and her lifeblood (the waters) in first place, for without her there would be no plant, animal or human life. The plant world stands second, for without it there would be no animal or human life. The animal is third. Last, and clearly least important within this unique hierarchy, come humans. Nothing whatsoever depends on their survival. Because human beings are the most dependent of all, it is we who owe the greatest duty of respect and care for the other three orders. Without them, we perish. Our role is, therefore, not to subdue individual parts to meet our own short-term goals, for that would disturb the balances among them. Instead, our role is to learn how they all interact with each other, so that we can try our best to accommodate to their existing relationships. Any other approach, in the long run, can only disrupt the healthy equilibriums that have existed on Earth for millions of years- and which created the conditions for our own evolution (Röss, 1996).

The government's implementation of Residential Schooling (their colonial policy to remove all children from their parents, "in order to take the savage out of them and Christianize and educate them") was the beginning of a confused way of thinking, believing and living. A 'forced institutionalized life' was imposed on thousands of children across Canada. This imposition of a foreign value system resulted in material and spiritual

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impoverishment and a pervasive sense of hopelessness in all of Canada's First Nations' people. The use of legislation and institutions shifted an interdependent state of living to that of dependency on a foreign colonial system. The present state of dependency and loss of identity is best described in the following metaphor by Daniel Quinn (Quinn, 1996):

*Systems thinkers have given us a useful metaphor for a certain kind of human behaviour in the phenomenon of the boiled frog. The phenomenon is this. If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will of course frantically try to clamber out. But if you place it gently in a pot of tepid water and turn the heat on low, it will float there quite placidly. As the water gradually heats up, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor, exactly like one of us in a hot bath, and before long with a smile on its face, it will unresistingly allow itself to be boiled to death. (p. 258)*

Like the boiled frog metaphor, gradually and consistently, the policies of colonization (with the intention to assimilate them into the mainstream society) removed Canadian Indigenous children from the influence of their culture. Indeed, it successfully removed the Cree-ness, the very Indigenous-ness from them. Furthermore, this policy did not provide them with sufficient education to help them adjust to the demands of the modern world. Their experiences in residential schools transformed them into wounded, lost souls. Ashamed of their Cree identity, they were no longer connected to the life force, so they felt disconnected from their Cree world. Additionally, without the mainstream education that was designed to assimilate them, they were not accepted into the mainstream world. They were left floating, not fitting and not belonging. Their dependencies had become disordered. Thousands of people were destroyed as through this process of legally enforced assimilation; Indigenous culture, spirit, identity, language, humanness, traditions, relationships, and ability to parent were extinguished. Life after the residential school had no meaning.

#### **The residential school**

My family history of the residential school experience started with my maternal grandmother. Orphaned at a very young

age, she attended a French convent, in the early 1900s, for fourteen years. My mother too, was sent to residential school from 1929 – 1937, for eight years. I attended school from 1952 – 1965, nine of those years were spent in a residential school. I share my story with the intention of bringing to reality the processes by which our people were handled as wards of the government.

*On a very sunny August morning in 1952, my parents brought me to the Saddle Lake churchyard in a wagon. The yard was filled with horses and wagons, parents stood around conversing, and children ranging from 5 to 18 years old waited. I didn't know what I was waiting for. My parents informed me that I was going to school. School held no meaning for me as I was only seven years old.*

*The wait wasn't long. A grain truck pulled up. All of the community members and children gathered around it. The Indian Agent had a list from which he began calling names. As each child's name was called out, he or she was lifted into a small opening at the back of the truck. The screaming and crying started. I saw children kicking and waving their arms as they tried to struggle free.*

*My brother's name was called out and I walked with him and my parents to the truck. I heard his name called again. He was lifted into the rectangular opening; I also found myself being lifted by my father. As he placed me in, I turned to look for my mom. My dad, looking guilty, sad, and helpless, whispered, 'my girl, don't cry'. Eyes filled with tears, he turned his back on me and walked away. I was obedient; I did not cry. I tried to peek from inside the walls of the grain truck but couldn't find any holes, so I looked up. There was nowhere else to look. As I looked up I found that my throat was no longer excruciatingly painful, I had found the trick to choking back my tears. As more children were lifted into the opening of the grain truck, the screams got louder. Some of us felt suffocated as we were packed tight, like a can of sardines.*

*This 'legalized kidnapping' of children seemed to take forever. Eventually, the truck started moving, causing the chains*

on the side of the truck to rattle, and we had to grab for them in order to maintain our balance.

The residential school was located 20 miles from our home. We finally arrived; the truck parked in front of a massive three-story brick building. As we were lifted out of the truck, we were instructed to walk up the front stairs. A committee of nuns standing on the stairwell directed us into the building. As we walked in, I observed the sterility of the long hallway; we could hear the echoes as we marched down this long passage. The boys were directed to one side and the girls were directed to the opposite side. That was the last time I spoke to my brother. The only time I saw him was at mealtime.

We had no sooner gathered into a large room, when we were asked to stand in line. Clothes were distributed to us: a brown cotton print dress, a broad cloth petticoat with a pocket sewn in front, an undershirt, a bloomer, brown woollen stockings, a pair of elastics for garters, and a long flannelette bathing gown. All the items had a number on them. My number was 78. Our personal clothes were bagged and removed. Two years later I became number 45.

After all clothes were issued, we were asked to put on our flannelette bathing gowns. We were again stood in line, but now according to number. I didn't know how to count, so a nun placed me in line according to my size and my number.

We were again marched into a bathroom area, where there were 25 sinks in a row. As each number was called, we went into a section where there was a nun with scissors. Many of the girls had long braids. As they went ahead, I saw the nun take one braid at a time and chop each braid off. Then we proceeded to the next station where a nun stood in front of a very large basin; I remember the whole room stunk from kerosene oil. It was used as delousing medicine. The process began again: a number called, we marched forward, got deloused. We had to keep this medicine on our heads until the next morning.

Upon completion of this task we were issued a towel, a toothbrush, and a comb with our engraved number. We then hung them up on hooks marked with our number. By the end of the first evening, I looked around and there was a replication of me in various sizes and forms: same hairdos, same brown print dresses, and same brown woollen stockings. To counter the "uniform" look some very fashion conscious girls rearranged their stockings to reflect their tastes: some rolled the stockings up to their ankles, some neatly folded their stockings, and some designed the slouched stocking look. Those looks were quickly discouraged and once again we were the same.

Lining up single file, or two by two, and marching was to be the order of the day. This was always done in silence. Like Pavlov's conditioning experiment with dogs, we were conditioned to line up at the sound of the bell. We lined up for prayers, we lined up for mass, we lined up for classes, we lined up for meals, we lined up for chores; we lined up to use the washrooms, we lined up for walks; and we lined up to go to the dorms. We learned to be silent. Order, consistency and predictability were strictly adhered to. An appropriate theme song would have been "When ants go marching two by two."

From that first day, we lost our voices. Lost is probably not the right term, because when you lose something you assume that you have misplaced it, and that you may eventually find it. We spoke when we were spoken to. We quickly learned that silence was golden. We never had an opinion. There was never an argument. Creativity was discouraged. Soon we stopped talking about our experiences and our families, our memories of them began to fade.

The times we were allowed to play in the yard gave us moments of freedom. We made sure we were far from the building, and away from the nuns. We teased, giggled, played, and the very brave ones spoke the Cree or Dene language.

Our schooling was made up of rote memory, spelling bees, and multiplication. The nuns taught. We listened. We

*remembered. This was very different from our parents and grandparents "kisknohamawasowina" (learnings and teachings), which taught children by modelling, showing, experiencing, and interacting. Instead, we read 'Dick and Jane' and learned about their dog, Spot. They lived in a white house with a picket fence, and they had an immaculately kept yard. They did not have a mosom or kokom (a grandfather or grandmother) they did not have a large extended family. What we read had no meaning to our own experiences and our own world. Our schooling was not connected to anything that we brought with us from our communities; our schooling totally disconnected us from our life force.*

My story is one piece of three generations of children removed from a world regulated by an Indigenous life force and transplanted into an alien totalitarian institutional environment. This story represents the experiences of First Nations' children, multiplied a thousand fold. Education in residential school did not connect to the 'life force' experience we brought with us from our communities. Further, it annihilated us from our language, a force that binds individuals not only to community, but also to ancestors and cultural behavioural norms.

### **The loss of language**

Language is the 'moral compass' of Canadian Indigenous people. The ability to speak an Indigenous language is an indispensable part of identity, as these languages convey a sense of distinctiveness, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of spiritual relationship to the universe: plants, animals, Mother Earth, rocks, and people. The elders in my community repeatedly tell us that our language, Cree, is a spiritual language. For example, "miskisik" means "an eye." 'Mis' refers to a body part, and the root word 'kisik' means 'the heavens'; it reminds us that our ability to see is a spiritual gift, that we are related to the Creator, and every relationship carries responsibilities.

Defined in the language are the relationship, roles and responsibilities of the extended family. For instance, the word 'nikawiy' means 'mother' and the word 'nikawiy's is 'auntie'; which literally translates as 'my little mother.' The role of the auntie, the mother's sister, was to take over the

mother's responsibility of training the child (like her own) in the absence of the child's mother. Similarly, 'nohtawiy' is 'father'. 'Nocawiy's is 'father's brother', or directly translated as 'my little father'- the brother shares the same responsibility to a child as the father. In Canadian Indigenous culture, everyone is addressed by their kinship relationship term; Primary importance of the kinship term is given over the given name. Proper names are rarely used in everyday situations. Using kinship terms, therefore, demonstrates respect between people. Relationships are then about how people take care of one another, and how they are connected to one another. When you grow up with this language, each word carries a deeper meaning that doesn't have to be explained; you know it by the time you are expected to carry those responsibilities.

Another concept that the Cree language carries (one that has great implications on conduct in the world) is 'pastahowin'. That is: when you have violated a boundary, you cause an imbalance in your relationships with people, the land, and the animals. Actions affect the world, thus we are responsible for the impact of those actions. For example, when children gather frogs, they are told it isn't their place to pick up those frogs and play with them, as frogs have their own place and space. By separating the frogs from their environment, they violated a boundary. Their parents and grandparents would tell say: "kocinanawaw", your actions involuntarily invite something upon your self that becomes something that you are not; you invite bad habits into your life. Another example of 'pastahowin' is when someone mimics or mocks someone with an illness and then down the line finds that that sickness has been invited upon themselves. 'Kocinehaw', means that if the illness doesn't happen to that person it will happen to one of their children or grandchildren. Understanding the terms "pastahowin and ocinewin" therefore helped me to monitor my behaviour and treat everybody and every living creature with respect.

Language creates the context for understanding relationships to the world. For example, the relationship to Mother Earth is 'Kikawiyinaw askiy': our collective mother, the earth, and the mother of all of us. The Cree language dictates how to view our responsibilities to mother earth; we owe

it to the next seven generations to ensure her health, as well as the health of her creatures. Unlike the western or capitalist worldview, which encourages the exploitation of mother earth, the Indigenous worldview indicates that the health of our future generations is at stake.

Our relationship with the universe is governed by reciprocity: you invite into your life, and the life of future generations, optimum health or illness by the way you conduct yourself. When language is used as a guide for relationships, its absence can create significant loss. Today, my people are coping with the chaos resulting from colonization and loss of language due to residential schooling.

#### Loss of language and present concerns

Colonization, coupled with the government's intent to assimilate the Indigenous population, contributed to the suppression of Indigenous languages and thus the loss of a moral compass and its inherent teachings of how to live in harmony with the universe. Loss of language is equivalent to loss of spirit; without a sense of spirit the Indigenous people became vulnerable to illnesses, such as the addiction and violence epidemic currently engulfing Indigenous communities.

Throughout the human life cycle, which according to Indigenous teachings, covers a span of seven stages – 'happy life', 'fast life', 'wandering life', 'truth', 'decision time', 'planting stage' and 'wisdom' (associated with elders) – language emphasizes the interconnections between all aspects of the universe. The land with its rocks, trees, creatures and seasons are the source of knowledge, land is a teacher to our children. As children mature into teenagers and later into adulthood, language provides the spiritual groundings that nurture their relationships within the human family, and just as importantly, with all living things: plants, animals, rocks, water, and mother earth. Loss of language is, therefore, literally the loss of a moral compass that helped to nurture these sacred connections, connections that make up the web of life.

As children mature into their teen years (wandering stage), without their Indigenous language, moral development has been severely compromised. They don't understand what their responsibilities are during this crucial phase of development. Traditional teachings that emphasized 'our

interconnectedness', through the oral transmission of stories and everyday life lessons, have been replaced by a mainstream culture that emphasizes consumption and individuality. Individualism has replaced *mamawikamatowin*: "working together". Puberty- a time when teenagers were once guided to explore their gifts, to grow into who they are to be, how they relate to one another, and what their responsibilities are to mother earth- has become a time of confusion, a time to experiment with drugs, or a time to be initiated into gangs. It appears that this loss of moral compass and sense of connection to others, and language, is the root cause of the extremely high suicide rate in the teen and young adult population in Canadian Indigenous communities.

The colonial process is coming back to haunt Indigenous communities (e *ki-ocinehikawiyahk*). The impact of the government's actions on the Indigenous people has now caused them to be people they are not supposed to be. The colonial process tried to make them change into something they were not, and now they suffer. During the residential school period, their connection to their language was destroyed, and with it, their connection to the teachings about who they are and how they are to be in this world. To restore balance and health, a connection to their language must be restored. Their lives are informed by the knowledge carried in their Indigenous languages.

The Elders in Indigenous communities talk about purpose, and how through ceremony, the people fast to understand their purpose. They attend ceremonies to find out from the spiritual grandmothers and grandfathers what their purpose in life is. Without ceremony, they are deprived of knowing what their purpose is and they can't fulfill their gifts and their purposes; they are out of balance – "kipastahonaw". How can they be healthy, without their language, which carries the knowledge of their ceremony? Through ceremony-embedded in language they gain a sense of purpose for living. Without purpose, they become vulnerable to illness such as depression because they navigate through life aimlessly. They can't be who they are and they are out of balance.

The residential school of the past, and a current public school curriculum that devalues Indigenous knowledge, has disrupted the traditional life cycle stages. Not having

experienced the 'wandering' and 'truth' stages as they were meant to be experienced, young Indigenous adults enter the 'planting time' without the knowledge of the 'sacredness of our connections to the universe', and so their children are deprived of their 'happy time' and harmonious journey through their stages of life. In my community, we are taught that our children are gifts and we have a responsibility to nurture them to grow into their responsibilities and relationships. Because we have been so separated from these teachings (that are defined in our language), we cannot transmit them to our children; therefore they lack the guidance they need to help create a world in balance and health. It is apparent that present day chaos within Canadian Indigenous people has history and connection with their loss of language.

#### Summary

When we know ourselves, our relationships, and our place in this Creation, we can make decisions that sustain balance and harmony. Without the knowledge that is contained in our languages, our decisions will likely adversely affect our lives and those around us. From a colonized perspective we cannot see the connection between how we think and the consequences we experience.

Canadian Indigenous people are now challenged to address the effects of the intergenerational wounding; at the same time, they must bring back the foundation of their culture. They must move forward with new visions for meaningful education for the survival of their children, their grandchildren, their future great grand children, and the seven generations yet to be born. As educators, social workers, administrators, and leaders, we must work with elders (and utilizing their knowledge) to recapture the 'life force'. This sacred knowledge must be incorporated as the foundation piece in all social work programming. We must recognise the importance of, as well as pursue, the dissemination of mother tongues. If we do not recapture this essential piece of being Indigenous, 'life force' will remain at bay and dependencies will continue to be disordered.

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