Learning about the residential school system in Canada

Liz Fowler & Mindy Willett

For more than a year, students in the Northwest Territories (NWT) and Nunavut have been learning about the history and legacy of residential schools. This new mandatory module is being taught in all Grade 10 classes across the two territories. Many Northern leaders — in politics, education, culture, language, and other areas — provided guidance on what should be covered in this module and how it should be taught.

I would not worry too much as to how it should be delivered. We will make mistakes along the way. We will learn from those mistakes. But, we cannot remain silent about it any longer. We will take every precaution to be sensitive about how we deliver it, but the message has to go to the schools, it has to reach our young people.

— the late Maris Tunngilik, Residential School survivor and long-term advocate for survivor rights originally from Repulse Bay, Nunavut.

One of the questions we posed to these leaders was: “What would you want your children or grandchildren to know, think, and feel about residential schools when they have completed this module?” The answers reflect the diversity and complexity of the experiences of those who attended residential schools.

Overwhelmingly, the leaders we spoke to responded that they wanted their own children to understand the past as a means to provide hope for tomorrow. They wanted others to know what their lives were like before residential school, so that what had been taken away could be fully known and understood. They wanted their children to be proud of their family members who had been at residential school and who were resilient in the face of the assimilative policies and practices of the schools. They wanted the positive side of residential schools shared, including stories of kind teachers who did their best. Some stated that without this acknowledgment healing could not take place. They wanted their grandchildren to remember those who did not come home, and to know the many facets of life in a residential school. They wanted everyone to understand that this is a complex story where happiness was found in unexpected places, and where tragedy occurred in places where those most vulnerable should have been safe. They wanted their children to know the many truths.

However, these leaders also stressed that they did not want their children to feel that the heavy burden of the past was also theirs to carry into their own futures. Instead, they recommended that the children learn what we should do now, and to think about the ways in which Canada can work towards becoming a healthy nation — a place where we can all be proud of who we are and where we come from.

We are not defined by residential school history. When you take into account our long, long history, it is a bump on the road. It is not who we are as a people. Our children must know the dark part of Canada’s history but we don’t want to take the rocks we’ve been carrying in our backpacks and simply put them into theirs and make it their burden to carry. We need to help them understand our knowledge — our gonawo — so they can be strong and know who they are.

— John B Zoe Tlicho, language and culture advocate. John was also a leader in negotiating the Tlicho Land Claim and Self-government Agreement.

The teacher’s guide, The Residential School System in Canada: Understanding the Past — Seeking Reconciliation — Building Hope for Tomorrow, written simultaneously in English and Inuktitut, each informing the other, was designed with this guidance in mind. It follows an arc. It begins by exploring how young children demonstrated independence and strength before the introduction of, or attendance at, residential schools. The activities in the middle sections of the module move into the time of darkness, when many colonial policies and practices at residential schools attempted to destroy people’s sense of who they were. In the final activities, the arc moves towards a place where,
together, we are trying to heal our relationships with each other towards reconciliation and the ultimate goal of returning to that original place of independence and strength.

Reconciliation means different things to different people and in different situations. In some cultures and languages, there is no equivalent concept. It can mean truth-telling, listening, forgiveness, acceptance, and understanding. It can exist between individuals, within a family, a community, and at a national level. It usually means restoring good will, respect, and cooperation in relations that have been disrupted. Some would say Canada is not ready for reconciliation and what is needed instead is the work of conciliation — which means to bring agreement or respectful relations between two parties. Some speculate that reconciliation was politically or economically motivated, resulting from the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Some question if what motivated it matters. Others point out that there is a long history and many examples of harmonious, mutually-beneficial relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

During their studies, the high school students discuss reconciliation to understand the importance of identifying ways to reconcile at different levels, if possible; they are encouraged to think critically about these processes, and to consider their own role in them. While we are not yet there as a nation, the goals of this module — that by understanding the past and seeking reconciliation in the present, there can be greater hope for tomorrow — are setting the course for today and for generations to come.

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In partnership with the Legacy of Hope foundation and modeled partially from their 100 Years of Loss module, the writing of the residential schools module began after extensive interviews and research, and the first edition was ready in the fall of 2012. In October 2012, all Northern Studies and Social Studies teachers from Nunavut and the NWT came together for a three-day professional development workshop on the history and legacy of residential schools to learn how to deliver the module in their classrooms. Teachers learned to de-centre themselves from classroom instruction. Instead, they learned how to play the role of facilitator and to allow for more space for the voices of former students and those who were involved in residential schools to do the teaching. During the 2012-2013 school year the module was piloted across both territories. A researcher worked with teachers and students to give feedback and with this knowledge a second edition of the module was developed and mailed out to all schools in the fall of 2013.

As Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner, Marie Wilson has stated, “The history and legacy of residential schools is not an Aboriginal Issue — it is a Canadian issue.” While this special issue of Northern Public Affairs is focused on Inuit education, the residential schools module is for all of us. The North is a special place, and the difficult conversations that need to take place in order for us to build a better tomorrow are happening here in our classrooms.

Qujannamiik, Qaana, Quyanainni, Maha, Merci, Thank you.

Liz Fowler was born in Igloolik, Nunavut. She worked in education for 31 years. After retiring in 2005 she started her own education consulting business in Yellowknife, NT.

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Mindy and Liz were the lead writers for the residential school module.

Endnotes
1 Portions of this article are adapted from the teacher’s guide, Residential School System in Canada: Understanding the Past — Seeking Reconciliation — Building Hope for Tomorrow, 2013. Department of Education, Culture and Employment (GNWT), Department of Education (GN), Legacy of Hope Foundation.