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Connecting Myself to Indian Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop

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Article abstract

This is a joint work between my Mom and I. It begins with a story passed down to my Mom about my grandfather's experience at an Indian Residential School. My Mom asks me questions about the story and I respond, learning more as we talk. We ended up writing back and forth to one another over a few days to complete this. I found it very emotional and hard to talk about.

We share this story fully acknowledging it is only one story, and it is shared with the intent for learning. I have heard many people say Residential Schools happened a long time ago. My mom started to share this story several years ago with primarily non-Indigenous social work students to demonstrate how Residential School and the Sixties Scoop impacted the five generations she speaks of in the story. My brother's first day of school became a much bigger moment for her and my Mushum.

We share this story with deep respect for all the families who were impacted by Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop. We stand with you and support all of your voices and recognize many of you have lost far more than we have. For all our non-Indigenous family and friends, we share this with respect for you as well, and to foster better understanding and as a step towards reconciliation. This is our truth.



Connecting Myself to Indian Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop

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Abstract

This is a joint work between my Mom and I. It begins with a story passed down to my Mom about my grandfather's experience at an Indian Residential School. My Mom asks me questions about the story and I respond, learning more as we talk. We ended up writing back and forth to one another over a few days to complete this. I found it very important and educational to write about.

We share this story fully acknowledging it is only one story, and it is shared with the intent for learning. I have heard many people say Residential Schools happened a long time ago. My mom started to share this story several years ago with primarily non-Indigenous social work students to demonstrate how Residential School and the Sixties Scoop impacted the five generations she speaks of in the story. My brother's first day of school became a much bigger moment for her and my Mushum.

We share this story with deep respect for all the families who were impacted by Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop. We stand with you and support all of your voices and recognize many of you have lost far more than we have. For all our non-Indigenous family and friends, we share this with respect for you as well, and to foster better understanding and as a step towards reconciliation. This is our truth.

Keywords: Residential School, Sixties Scoop, storytelling

¹ Authors' note: Alexa Salazar attends high school at Campbell Collegiate and is a flourishing ballet dancer. She is an accomplished pianist. Noela Crowe-Salazar MSW is a private consultant and she trains and teaches social work classes at the University of Regina and Dalhousie. Alexa and Noela acknowledge Alexa's brother Skyler, and Mushum Noel Crowe, who have consented for their stories to be shared this way.

Introduction

My name is Alexa Crowe-Salazar. I am currently in Grade 9 and I am 15 years old. In Grade 8 I was asked to complete an assignment in my social studies class that I found difficult to complete. I disagreed with what was asked because I felt strongly it did not reflect my understanding of our history and experience. Instead of completing that assignment I did this work with my mom, and I explored more about my own family history. I learned a lot, and learned I can write about it, but I cannot talk about it as easily. My Mom's name is Noela Crowe-Salazar.

In preparation for this work I watched videos about the Sixties Scoop (CBC, 2016; Sinclair, 2016). In addition, I attended a screening of *nîpawistamâwin: We Will Stand Up*, a documentary by Tasha Hubbard about Colten Boushie (Hubbard, 2019). Colten's family was at the screening in Regina and they did a panel after the documentary.

A Story From My Mom

This story is told from my mother's perspective.

The history of residential schools and the impact on the people who attended the schools and their families was profound and has extended through to present day generations. On June 11, 2008, the Prime Minister of Canada offered the following apology:

Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm and has no place in our country To the approximately 80,000 living former students, and all families and communities, the Government of Canada now recognizes it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions, that it created a void in many lives and communities, and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that, in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow, and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that, far too often, these institutions gave rise to abuse or neglect and were inadequately controlled, and we apologize for failing to protect you. Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering from the same experience, and for this we are sorry. The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever again prevail. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks for forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2008).

This apology stands central to reconciliation. I watched this apology with another Indigenous colleague at the Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services. It was a surreal setting and we were surrounded by the non-Indigenous policy and program staff of Social Services who were all working on tasks. We were the only ones in the office who watched the live stream of the apology. It was surreal given the number of Indigenous children in care and the setting where we watched the apology. I was adopted in the Sixties Scoop, and to hear the words “we apologize for having done this” was indescribable. I situated the apology via an “other” lens until the words “all families” was included. In a second, I became a living part of my father’s history that I had previously been removed from.

My father is now 86 years old. He attended Lebret Residential School. Dad says he is not traditional, and he doesn’t believe in the church or so-called “Indian ways.” He says this is due to being in residential school. Despite this, how he talks to me and the way he shares stories is very traditional in oral storytelling and aspects of communication. Sometimes he will discipline or correct me as an adult, and it is not like anything in western culture. His tone is a fraction different, and he will not look at me. I know then to not look at him, and I will look down and listen. He will then talk, and if he is telling me something to correct me as an adult, he will talk at length. We left his house one day, and I commented to my son on how harshly I was corrected. My son was around 10 years old. He had not even noticed. It is subtle but very effective. When Dad does that I feel remorse, I think of what I have done, and I want to change how I acted. When he is done, he will look at me and then talk of something else: He will call me “my girl,” which is a straightforward but deeply caring sentiment that many Indigenous parents use. He always ends with being caring to me and gentle in words. While I have never asked Dad about this, I have watched other Indigenous parents of his generation do the same thing.

Dad was taken to Lebret Residential School when he was four years old. He was the eldest child in his family, and he said his Kokum thought it was good for him to go, and he was a big child, so they sent him. He recounted the story of the day he was taken to me while we sat at Treaty Four powwow. The powwow is held annually in Fort Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan in September. It is in a valley east of Regina. The leaves were changing, and it was a warm, sunny afternoon. My children were small and were quietly playing at our feet. We watched the powwow dancers, and he started to tell me with great detail about the day.

I thought he was telling me about the day we were in. I looked at him, and he was looking down. I looked to the valley foliage and listened to his memory of the day he was taken to Residential School. His description was so rich in detail; I felt I was there with him. He shared how he felt, the sound of the wagon wheels on the ground, the smells, how the air felt. He talked about arriving and the days following and not being able to speak Cree. His description of the deep loneliness for his parents was very profound. I felt like I was sitting beside him at the school. He saw his parents again at Christmas briefly, and then in June the following year. He spoke briefly of the abuse he endured and that he witnessed. His words were heavy.

At the end of the story, we sat quietly. Dad let me sit with it for several minutes. I felt his remorse, and his pain and I knew the story was much more purposeful: it was to add me to his history,

and so I understood why I was never a part of his life until my later adult years. It also helped me understand why I had been adopted in the Sixties Scoop. After letting me sit with it for several minutes, he looked to my children who were still at our feet playing. He asked me how old my son was right now; it seemed like an odd question because I knew he knew how old he was. I told him, “He is four.” Dad was quiet, and only then, he told me, “I was four when they took me.” As a parent, there was no way not to feel that deep anguish and pain, to see my son sitting at my feet made me think, “What if my son was taken from me right now and I couldn’t see him until Christmas?” The finesse and expertise of oral storytelling is very sacred to Indigenous cultures, it has a richness that is not describable, and there are no words to be written that could equal oral tradition.

Dad told me the story, and two years later, I took my son for his first day of grade one. I walked with him and watched him line up and go into the school. I came home and called my Dad. I asked him if his grandfather also went to Residential School. He did. I told my Dad I had just walked my son to school, and I would walk back and get him at the end of the day. I would bring him home and feed him and talk to him about his day, and I would put him to bed later that night. I told my Dad; my son is the first child in five generations who will get to come home to his parents after his first day of school. I could hear my Dad’s happiness in his voice and his tears. It was finally over; the cycle of children being removed from our family. It was 2008.

A Conversation With My Mom

After taking a few moments to reflect upon her story and the videos that I watched in preparation for my school assignment, my Mom and I discussed what I had learned. We found it was not easy for me to talk about. We both write. The following is our written conversation back and forth. This took place over a few days and has been edited for clarity.

Mom: Alexa, how do you feel after watching and reading these things?

Alexa: After reading and listening to information that holds many emotions for many different people, I’m not entirely aware of what I feel. Some of the information I’ve heard before and have known for many years. I remember being younger and learning the basic knowledge about this topic from you and feeling sad about it. Even at a younger age than now, my instant reaction was to feel sorrow. If you’re a human aware of this basic information, feeling the sorrow of this topic is natural. It’s when you really start to learn more about the truth and pain behind this history that you begin to be overcome by all the emotions of thousands of people. Feelings of anger, fear, guilt, pain, and sorrow come to my mind. With the new knowledge, I continue to learn, and I always start with the feeling of sadness that comes with any tragedy. I’m still unaware of the first-hand trauma and feelings of the thousands of people that are affected by this topic more than I to this day.

Mom: What do you think of my experience of being adopted in the Sixties Scoop? Do you understand it is about systems? Systems are how the hospitals work, or how it works when you go to the doctor. Legislation and policy built the systems that created Indian Residential Schools, in particular, the *Indian Act*. Policies such as the peasant farming policy disallowed us to compete in agriculture. We

were only allowed two acres and a cow, and that occurred in 1880 when the First Nations by North Battleford were successfully farming. They were more successful with crops than the settler farmers at market. This success led to complaints from the settler farmers stating in a letter to Ottawa, “They [First Nations] sold this land.” Due to this, the peasant farming policy was implemented. It was set up for First Nations to fail at being successful farmers, and then the failure was used to validate the creation of the *Indian Act* and residential schools. It also added to many stereotypes that still prevail today. In the claim the settler farmers made, it is notable to state, the land was never sold. This is from an article I have talked to you about called *Two Acres and a Cow* (Carter, 1989). By review and research of the oral histories and accounts of the treaty negotiations, from Treaty 1 through 7, there was never any documented account of ceding of land. The language used stated the land would be shared to the depth of a plough. This is evidenced in a book called *No Surrender, the Land Remains Indigenous* (Krasowski, 2019). I went to the book launch and talked to you about it afterward. Do you understand what I mean by systems? It is important you understand it because people now get positional or feel resentment; both Indigenous and settlers can feel this way. Unfortunately, this stops reconciliation, and the fact is that systems are the problem, and while people create systems, they often are not aware of how far-reaching those systems can be.

Alexa: I don’t think I’ll ever fully understand what you would’ve felt going through a system like that. I’m still learning about the Sixties Scoop, and even though this happened to someone very close to me, I still have questions about it. I was told briefly when I was younger that you had been adopted. When I was smaller, I thought nothing of it because I hadn’t learned much about the time period when it had happened. Now, I’ve learned that First Nations children were taken from their birth families. I’ve heard stories of where it was done forcibly, and I question now, were you taken without the choice of your guardian? With the stories of force, my instant thought is this isn’t right. It definitely was not right. I struggle to understand how something like this could’ve happened. I often think I’m lucky for being alive during a different time because back then this could’ve happened to me. The fact is it shouldn’t have happened at all, and it’s sad I even have to think these things.

Mom: On June 11, 2008 Steven Harper made an historic apology. What part stands out to you or makes you have questions?

Alexa: What first stood out to me was the date the apology was made. The question that came with this was, why did it take so long? Why did it take so long for a group of educated people to finally realize that taking children away from their families and child rights was wrong? I think it’s good that somebody finally apologized, but with so much trauma brought from the many years of abuse, it’s not as easy as an apology. Personally, I don’t think any apology counts until actions are done to make many situations that happen now never happen again. In the present time, there are still people dying and being murdered that have many connections and have a trail to what has happened in the past. Instead of apologizing, a change should be made. I know many people are working to fix things; to fix the future.

Mom: Your view on what is an apology is correct, Alexa. Pamela Palmater is an Indigenous lawyer and educator. She spoke at a lecture at the university last year (P. Palmater, personal

communication, February 21, 2018), and I told you about what she said. Pamela shared that a real apology is the kind your Kokum gave you when you were young and you took another child's toy. You apologized, but you also made sure you would never do it again. To make it real you gave the child something back that was very important to you, maybe your lunch with all your favourite things. Even then, it was not over. You then became like a brother or a sister to the other child, and you personally were there for them going forward. This is a real apology. It is another important lesson that Elders teach and is part of Indigenous families, systems, and ways of living.

Mom: Tell me what you learned about the Sixties Scoop that you did not know before.

Alexa: Recently, I learned some new information about the Sixties Scoop that really opened my eyes. In school, we don't learn a lot about the details of the Sixties Scoop. New things I learned were the system of the Sixties Scoop and the impact it had on people around me. Before, I'd somehow thought that the children taken from their families during the Sixties Scoop were all given up by choice. To later learn that kids were taken and put into a system was a bit shocking, as that's not how I imagined it. To now know that children and their families were treated like animals disgusts me.

Mom: Some children adopted in the Sixties Scoop had worse experiences. The AIM program in Saskatchewan was not a part of the Scoop, in that the children put in that program were already apprehended. It is debatable on the intent to apprehend to put into the program though. My adoption record from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services clearly outlined the plan to have me be adopted; I was an infant. My siblings were not adopted. In the end, it's not about my personal story so much, Alexa, as it is about the systems and the policies and legislation. Those are the changeable things that can be done now. For us, you and me, it is important you know what my experience was because it is important it stops. You are truth and reconciliation. Senator Murray Sinclair (2015) clearly stated that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report and work were done for you, Alexa. It was done for all the young Indigenous people across the country so you can change things going forward. How you speak out is important.

Mom: What are your reflections on the story I told you about Mushum going to Residential School and your brother's first day of school?

Alexa: Last night, I read this story for the first time. I sat in a room reading it by myself, and when I was only three sentences in, I felt a lump in my throat. A sudden emotion came from nowhere, and I'm not sure why. When reading about personal experiences that somehow relate to me, I become very emotional. The story had not been told to me or directed to me. After generations of this story, I can feel the pain just through writing, as if it happened to me. The last part of the story where you had told Mushum that my older brother, Skyler, was the first in our family's many generations to come home every day really stuck with me. Residential schools may be over, but that pain remains forever. Now I am focusing on how we can grow from here.

Mom: It is a hard story, Alexa. You know the personal impacts it has, and it is not my intention that we share our personal story, but you know the impacts. It was with a good intention on how you responded to this question, and you did it in a very respectful way. Kinanâskomitin (thank you), Alexa. I appreciate that you did this work and for you this is important learning. Love, Mom.

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