“You feel you don’t actually belong:” Attending High School in the Sioux Lookout Zone, 1969-1996

North de Pencier, Ian Puppe, Carrie Davis, Drishti Dhawan, Mithila Somasundaram, Gerald McKinley

ABSTRACT

From 1969 to 1996, due to a lack of local high schools, young people from communities in the Sioux Lookout Zone of Northwestern Ontario travelled to attend boarding schools in larger communities further south. Within this period, the University of Toronto coordinated medical services in the Sioux Lookout Zone and many documents in the University of Toronto Archives capture the challenges faced by these adolescents while pursuing their high school education. In this paper, we focus on the Indigenous voices in the records of the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital to study the socioeconomic conditions and student experiences of attending high school. We explore education reports from Sandy Lake First Nation as a means of documenting the impact of the education system on First Nations youth. We argue that the poor quality of on-reserve elementary schools and the isolation of leaving home for high school, combined with less time to learn traditional skills, set students up for failure in their academic studies and in the job market.

INTRODUCTION

By 1969, the Canadian government was beginning to sever its financial ties to residential schools in Ontario. As a result, most Indigenous students in Ontario were attending provincially operated schools, not federally operated Indian Residential Schools.¹ Nonetheless, during this era there were no high schools on the reserves in the Sioux Lookout Zone of Northwestern Ontario, an area where almost the entire population were Status Indians. This meant that most of the First Nations high school students would live in various kinds of residences at provincially operated boarding schools in larger communities such as Atikokan, Dryden, Geraldton, Kenora or Lakehead (Thunder Bay).²

In this paper, we analyze the challenges that confronted the First Nations high school students of the Sioux Lookout Zone in the context of colonization. The provincial schools that operated for students in this region were the immediate successors to the Indian Residential Schools that furthered Canada’s colonial project of assimilating Indigenous youth by destroying Indigenous cultural structures. We draw primarily on historical records of interviews with teenagers in Sandy Lake as a case study to frame our analysis of archival evidence. Students were underprepared by the middle schools in their home communities, and found themselves at an academic disadvantage when attending high school in larger communities. Evidence indicates that these students were

lonely in high school and that there were few job opportunities on reserves, even for those who graduated. By attending high school, young people missed out on learning traditional skills and found themselves culturally disconnected from their families and communities. In this way, provincial high schools advanced the colonial project of undermining the connection between First Nations youth and their communities in the Sioux Lookout Zone.

METHODS

The records of the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital are located within the University of Toronto Archives and contain diverse primary sources including research, newspaper articles, and personal letters. The analysis presented used all sources that discussed issues facing adolescents when they attended high school. Analysis focused on sources that were either written by First Nations people or interviews that quoted First Nations people extensively. These primary sources were placed in the context of anthropologist James Waldram’s compelling study on the history of mental health care providers’ interactions with Indigenous North Americans.³ The 3 main sources cited in this paper are a 1969 report from provincial education officials who visited Sandy Lake and interviewed local young people about their experiences when they attended high school,² the final report of the Youth Corps Jobs Program which was compiled in 1980 from the reports of 9 Indigenous Mental Health Counsellors,⁴ and a collection of newspaper clippings from 1978 that quote First Nations leaders.⁵ The experiences of the First Nations youth in Sandy Lake are used as a case study in the analysis.

RESULTS

Young people coming from reserves in the Sioux Lookout Zone were not well prepared for high school by their elementary educations. By the late 1960s, elementary schools had been established on the reserves in the Sioux Lookout Zone, which allowed children to study with the support of their families and their communities.² However, the low quality of these schools meant that students started high school grade-levels behind their Southern Ontario classmates. In some interviews with high school students from Sandy Lake, recorded in a 1969 Ontario Ministry of Education Report, the students said that they “had to catch up a lot while going to high school” outside of their home communities.² This was in part because they “didn’t finish a single book in grade eight,”² and because they felt that the school on the reserve “doesn’t prepare you well enough to outside [sic] ... you’re not on the same level as other people.”² The high school students from Sandy Lake

also felt that there was a lot more competition in high school than they experienced on the reserve.² Furthermore, the structure of school was different than the students were used to—for example, it was more strict.² In *Revenge of the Windigo*, Waldram wrote that “schools for Aboriginal peoples have been uniformly terrible for much of their history,”³ and this assessment is supported by the statements of the young people in the Sioux Lookout Zone.

In addition to the academic challenge, the life of an Indigenous high school student was lonely because it involved prolonged periods of living away from friends and family.^{2,4} In the 1969 Sandy Lake interviews, students commented on their isolation in high school. One student said, “in the city I didn’t know how to make friends.”² The living situation at high school was different from that of the reserve. They had to “get used to the (boarding) home, new set of rules, time, manners and dinner hours,”² and had “to learn new ways of acting, to knock on doors before entering, ‘you’re welcome’, ‘excuse me’. No word for these in Cree.”² One of the students reported that “the surroundings are tough; you get lost; you don’t know which is the main street.”² Another said that they “didn’t like the town [and] had nothing to do.”¹

The challenges of academic struggles and absent social support structures resulted in many Indigenous youth not graduating from high school and returning to find few opportunities for themselves on the reserve.⁴ In 1978, Joe Meekis, a Sandy Lake band councillor, was quoted in a clipping from an unlabeled newspaper in the records as saying:

“Many of our young people attending the high schools in the southern urban areas return home because they are unable to cope with the cultural change as well as with the homesickness which occurs. The result is that we have many young people in our village throughout the year who are unemployed and not involved in any meaningful activity. Eventually some get caught up in the alcohol and drug abuse problems that exist in our community.”⁵

There were few employment opportunities on the reserves, and even fewer for young people who had dropped out of high school.⁴

In the records, First Nations voices from the Sioux Lookout Zone contended that that education should bring advantages, but expressed frustration with the sacrifices that their communities had to make for education that seemed to bring very little benefit. Abel Fiddler, an elder in Sandy Lake, expressed this frustration when he wrote:

“We want our children to learn the skills necessary for them to have a chance to get jobs in the white man’s world but in the process is it necessary for them to lose their own history and the skills of trapping and wilderness survival? Surely there must be some method of teaching the basics of both cultures, without one overriding the other.”⁵

In the records of the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital, the reports of outsiders and the voices of First Nations students and leaders agreed that the high schools that were available were not serving the youth of the Sioux Lookout Zone with a useful educational experience towards gainful employment. The challenges that high school dropouts faced were compounded because while they were

gone from their communities at high school, they had missed out on learning the traditional skills for hunting and trapping that had allowed older generations to live off the land.¹

DISCUSSION

Studying the challenges of Indigenous students going to high school is important because it may help to understand the dramatic rise in suicide rates among young people in the Sioux Lookout Zone. It is well-documented that poor social determinants of health, including unemployment, are risk factors for mental illness.⁶ For students, the loneliness and disconnection from home, combined with their return to a lack of employment opportunities, added to a sense of hopelessness that may have contributed to an increase in suicide rates. Suicide rates increased in the Sioux Lookout Zone from being almost unheard of in the 1960s to among the highest rates in the world in the 1990s.⁷ A high school education held the promise that Indigenous youth would learn how to obtain gainful employment. However, First Nations students found that their education did not lead to a job, and instead that high school continued to serve the purpose that Indian Residential Schools had: to separate them from their families and to diminish their capacity to live off the land, by limiting the time that they had to learn traditional skills. The experience of attending provincial high schools had marginalized them in a similar way to how the experience of attending Indian Residential Schools had marginalized youth in their parents’ and grandparents’ generations.

A weakness of this analysis is that these records were created and maintained primarily by non-Indigenous health care providers and therefore are curated according to the ideas and biases of non-Indigenous people.

CONCLUSION

In order to attend high school from 1969 to 1996 in the Sioux Lookout Zone, First Nations teenagers had to leave their communities and live at boarding schools in larger southern towns. Interviews with teenagers in the Sandy Lake in 1969 captured the ways in which this experience was very isolating. Adolescents often left high school, only to realize that there were few employment opportunities for them, and that they had missed out on learning the traditional skills that could have allowed them to live off the land.

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