



THEY DIDN'T COME HOME: MISSING CHILDREN AND UNMARKED GRAVES ASSOCIATED WITH RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS IN CANADA

Introduction

Note: There is a constant flow of new and emerging information relating to residential schools and unmarked graves and the actual numbers may never be known. Teachers need to approach this work understanding that this is what we know today, but that there will likely be more unmarked graves uncovered as searches continue in communities across Canada to recover the bodies of missing children.

The following excerpt is taken from the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. The full publication can be found [here](#).

“The establishment of a specific “Missing Children and Unmarked Burials” mandate did not come until after the Settlement Agreement had been approved by the courts. On April 24, 2007, Liberal Member of Parliament Gary Merasty (Desnethé/Missinippi/Churchill River) raised the issue of residential school death rates in the House of Commons. He stated that the schools were places of disease, hunger, over-crowding, and despair.

Many children died. In 1914, a departmental official said “fifty per cent of the children who passed through these schools did not live to benefit from the education which they had received therein.” Yet, nothing was done.... Mr. Speaker, above all else, I stand for these children, many of whom buried their friends, families and siblings at these schools.... Will the Prime Minister commit to the repatriation of the bodies and an apology to the residential school survivors?

James Prentice, who was both the minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development as well as the minister responsible for the Office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada, responded, ‘We will get to the bottom of the disappeared children. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will hear much about that. I have instructed our officials to look into that and to work with Oblate records of the churches to get to the bottom of this issue, and this sad chapter in our history.’”

The TRC identified 3,201 deaths. We now know that this is not the complete number. Due to unmarked graves and unreported deaths of students, the actual number is higher and may never be known. For approximately half the deaths identified by the TRC, there is no cause of death listed. Furthermore, the records that were kept were likely not accurate because the cause of death would have often been determined by individuals without medical training, leading to misdiagnoses.

For decades survivors have spoken the truth that are only now being fully investigated on a national scale. Many of these graves were dug by other students, who were forced to do the unthinkable and left with horrifying memories and no support to deal with the trauma. These burial sites are not “discoveries” — graves are being “recovered”.



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Focus Questions

What is the truth that survivors have known for generations? I.e., that children were buried at residential schools and, in many cases, their deaths were not recorded, remembered, or marked in a respectful way. What is the truth about missing and unmarked graves associated with residential schools in Canada, including accurate information about when, where, and how these graves are being investigated?

Time

60-90 minutes

Grade Level

9-12

Learning Goals

- Students will examine data about residential schools and unmarked graves.
- Students will reflect on the data and answer questions about the residential school system.

Materials Needed

- Electronic device with internet access
- Paper
- Writing utensils

Connection to the Canadian Geography Framework

Concepts of Geographic Thinking

- Patterns and trends
- Spatial significance
- Interrelationships
- Geographic perspective

Lesson Implementation

Minds on

Begin a class discussion with your students to test their knowledge, using the following questions:

- When were unmarked graves first found at a residential school? Note: Students will most likely guess Kamloops because of the extensive media coverage surrounding it, but this was not the first known school with unmarked graves.
- Why do you think Kamloops and the 215 unmarked graves were so significant?
- How many schools since Kamloops have had ground searches initiated? Who has initiated those searches?
- How many unmarked graves have been found since Kamloops?
- Why do you think that public interest has dissipated since the initial events at Kamloops?

If there are any questions students didn't have an answer for or if new questions arose, record them on the board to keep in mind as the lesson goes on.

Action

In the next part of the lesson, explain to your students that the information about missing children and unmarked burial sites has been considered the "unfinished business" of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada due to the limitations of their mandate. Despite the incomplete data, a number of significant facts emerge from the statistical analysis of the Named and Unnamed registers:

- The Commission has identified 3,200 deaths on the Named and Unnamed registers of confirmed deaths of residential school students.
- For just under one-third of these deaths (32%), the government and the schools did not record the name of the student who died.
- For just under one-quarter of these deaths (23%), the government and the schools did not record the gender of the student who died.
- For just under one-half of these deaths (49%), the government and the schools did not record the cause of death.

(Source: [Canada's Residential Schools: Missing Children and Unmarked Burials](#))



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Inquiry Process

- Interpret and analyze
- Evaluate and draw conclusions
- Communicate
- Reflect and respond

Geospatial Skills

- Spatial representations

Record or project these numbers on the board as you share the data with students. Have a class discussion using the following questions:

1. What do these facts tell us about half of the student deaths?
2. Should these facts be accepted now, knowing what we know today (i.e., taking into account the recent searches and recovery of unmarked graves and the existence of non-IRSSA recognized residential schools)?
3. Do you think that the same approach to record-keeping was the practice for non-Indigenous students in other schools even during the same period of time as these records were kept at residential schools? Why do you think this unequal treatment existed?
4. Why is it important to learn about these parts of Canada's history? What role does education play in truth and reconciliation?

Direct students to the Paths to Reconciliation's Unmarked burial sites associated with residential schools online map. Give students time to explore the map and ask them to take note of the different categories in the legend. Have a class discussion about the number of schools in each category and what those numbers imply. Why was 2021 a significant turning point? Why are there so many sites with active investigations? Direct students' attention to examples like Coqualeetza and Sechelt (in British Columbia), where there are unmarked burial sites that were recovered prior to 2021 as well as sites of active investigations. What might students infer from this information?

Invite students to work together in small groups to select one of the schools identified on the map and do their own research into the investigation being conducted at that site and/or the process of recovery at the unmarked burial site. Have each group share their findings with the class, including inconsistencies that they found in their research. Once students have completed their research, have them present to the rest of the class. Facilitate a discussion about common themes and issues that students learned about. Return to the questions from the beginning of the lesson and see if students have been able to find answers to those questions over the course of their research.

Conclusion and Consolidation

As new information is continually surfacing, stemming from the initial work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, one of the most important actions we can take is to commit to continued learning. All too often when tragic information is shared publicly, there is a brief period of shock, outrage, and calls for action, and then the country goes quiet again.

End the activity by gathering your students' thoughts on how they feel about reading and viewing graphs on missing children and unmarked burials. Remind students that this is only the beginning and more research will be done in the years to come. Finally, have students pose their own questions based on what they want to learn more about regarding missing children and unmarked burial sites. Then, invite them to explore possible answers to their questions through research that has been conducted after the release of the TRC report in 2015.



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Extensions

- Have students research some of the methods that various communities have used or are currently using to seek out and uncover unmarked burial sites.
- Research Indian hospitals in Canada and how they were associated with missing children and unmarked graves and burial sites.
- Have students research what efforts the government of Canada has made to find unmarked graves and what their current process is to date.

Modifications

- For younger students, have a class discussion about news stories surrounding residential schools, what they know, and what they wonder about.
- For younger students, have a class discussion about safe and caring schools and how important it is for Indigenous families to know that when their children go to school they can trust that teachers will care for their children in the best way possible.
- Discuss intentional language and appropriate terms. For example, the following considerations should be explored:
- Why do we use the term “recovering” as opposed to “discovery” when referring to unmarked burial sites?
- Why are students who attended residential schools referred to as “survivors” and their children “intergenerational survivors”?
- Why are many Indigenous people starting to note that we should not even be calling these places schools? (“Institutions” is becoming a more commonly used term as there was no real education that happened in many of these places and survivors talk about feeling like they were in prison rather than in a school.)

Assessment Opportunities

- Teachers can assess students’ participation in class discussions.
- Teachers can assess students’ participation in interpreting data.
- Teachers can assess students’ research projects and presentations.

Sources and Additional resources

- [Canada’s Residential Schools: Missing Children and Unmarked Burials](#)