

# Sites of Truth, Sites of Conscience

## Learning and Dialogue Guide

### Overview

This guide has been designed to help teachers and students exploring the *Sites of Truth, Sites of Conscience* report better understand why truth, accountability, justice, and reparations are essential to reconciliation. Included are a list of questions that can be used for independent study or to frame class discussions, activities for before and after reading the report, and links to websites that provide starting points for further study.

### Grades

Secondary (the report contains content relating to the deaths and forced disappearances of children).

### Learning Objectives

- Understand how settler colonial laws and policies led to wide-ranging abuses against Indigenous peoples.
- Examine how truth and accountability are essential to reconciliation.
- Discuss the importance of finding truth, restoring human dignity, and commemorating burial sites.

### About the Office of the Special Interlocutor

In June 2022, Kimberly Murray was appointed as the Independent Special Interlocutor to speak directly with those leading search and recovery work and with governments, churches and other individuals and organizations to help identify and remove existing barriers experienced by Survivors, Indigenous families, and communities leading the sacred work of recovering missing children and unmarked burials. The Office of the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites associated with Indian Residential Schools assists Survivors and communities in various ways, including connecting them to funding programs, technical experts, and record holders.

### About the Report

In July 2024, the Office of the Independent Special Interlocutor published the *Sites of Truth, Sites of Conscience* report, which traces the life histories of many Indigenous children to illustrate the importance of finding the truth, restoring human dignity to Indigenous children, and commemorating their burial sites.

A historical report, based primarily on evidence gathered from the government and churches' own archival records, the report directly links the actions and omissions of the federal government and the churches that operated Indian Residential Schools with the crisis of the missing and disappeared children and unmarked burials. It documents the buildings, cemeteries, and burial grounds at several former Indian Residential Schools. Once places of silence and suffering, they are now sites of truth.

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### Activities to Consider Before Reading the Report

#### Activity 1

The information in the report may be upsetting for some because it contains content relating to the deaths and forced disappearances of children at former Indian Residential Schools and other institutions. Discuss the possible effects that reading the report may have on students, including emotional responses. Ensure students have access to appropriate self-care options should they feel overwhelmed (e.g., journaling, taking a walk outside, speaking with a counsellor).

If you or your students require immediate support, please contact:

- The Indian Residential School Survivors Society's 24/7 Crisis Support line: 1-800-721-0066
- The 24-hour National Indian Residential School Crisis Line: 1-866-925-4419

#### Activity 2

Give students time to explore the website for the Office of the Special Interlocutor, paying close attention to the:

- Mandate
- Guiding Principles
- Expected Outcomes
- Logo Story
- News Stories
- Past Gatherings
- FAQ

#### Activity 3

Review the final report of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#), and the 94 "calls to action" (or recommendations) to further reconciliation between Canadians and Indigenous Peoples. Discuss which calls to action are supported by the work of the Office of the Special Interlocutor ([calls 71-76](#)).

#### Activity 4

Briefly introduce the history of residential schools in Canada using the [volume on Truth and Reconciliation](#) from the *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*.

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### Activities to Consider After Reading the Report

#### Activity 1

Invite students to answer the discussion questions on page 4 individually or in pairs, with the option of sharing their response with the class afterwards, or use the questions to guide a class discussion. Students can also work together to identify a short list of main points from their reading and use this to complete a brief summary of the report. Keep track of keywords, emotions or reflections that were similar across students, and use these to help students process their emotional response to the report.

#### Activity 2

Explore the [Paths to Reconciliation](#) project as a class, including the map of Indian Residential Schools that were not recognized by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, and the map of Unmarked Burial Sites associated with Indian Residential Schools (Figure 1.1 from the [Sites of Truth, Sites of Conscience](#) report). These maps are interactive and allow students to analyze the locations and stories of Indian Residential Schools and Unmarked Burial Sites in detail. Note: this website includes additional educational resources that explain how to use the interactive maps and that focus on the personal stories of three Residential School Survivors.

#### Activity 3

Canada was established through the process of colonialism which involved the creation of laws and policies that led to wide-ranging abuses against Indigenous peoples. Reconciliation is the ongoing process of building a renewed relationship between the Government of Canada, non-Indigenous and Indigenous Peoples based on the recognition of rights, respect and partnership. However, some structures and systems that continue to shape and govern present-day society still continue to harm, ignore, or disadvantage Indigenous Peoples to the benefit of non-Indigenous groups. Youth today may grapple with overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame and helplessness, but many resources exist to help guide them in their participation in reconciliation. For example:

- [First Nations Child & Family Caring Society](#)
- [Kairos Canada](#)
- [Kids Help Phone](#)
- [Roots of Resilience](#)
- [The 4Rs Youth Movement](#)

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### Discussion Questions

#### Introduction (Pages 7 – 22)

Which power structures operated the Indian Residential School System?

What was the goal of the Indian Residential School System?

How were Indigenous Peoples' human rights violated through the Indian Residential School System?

How does the *Sites of Truth, Sites of Conscience* report build on the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada?

What is forced assimilation?

What is the difference between “missing” and “disappeared”?

Why did the Law Commission of Canada describe Indian Residential Schools as “total institutions”?

What are some implications of societal apathy towards the lives and deaths of Indigenous children?

Why did unmarked burials become a common reality across Indian Residential Schools?

In what ways can the devaluation of the lives and deaths of Indigenous children destroy cultural heritage?

What is denialism, and in what ways is it still an issue today?

What is the primary purpose of the *Sites of Truth, Sites of Conscience* report?

#### Chapter 1 (Pages 23 – 88)

Why are Indian Residential School cemeteries and unmarked burial sites now being called sites of truth and conscience?

What other types of institutions resulted in the unnecessarily high death rates of Indigenous children?

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How do cemeteries like the one at Sacred Heart Indian Residential School illustrate the racist and discriminatory treatment of Indigenous children?

How can the oral histories provided by Survivors help guide research into unmarked graves and burial sites?

How did Indian Residential Schools exploit children to reduce costs of operation?

The Government of Canada is investing in work to address the legacy of residential schools and the ongoing impacts of the Residential School System on Survivors. Do you think this compensates for the human rights violations that occurred at the Schools?

What are some of the different types of challenges that Survivors and researchers are facing in their search for the missing and disappeared children?

Why is it important for Canada, the churches, and all Canadians to accept the truth about the Indian Residential School System, including the evidence of genocide and mass human rights violations?

### **Chapter 2 (Pages 89 – 120)**

What is a Magdalen Asylum/Magdalen Laundry and in what ways is it similar to a Good Shepherd Home?

For what reasons were Indigenous children sent to Good Shepard Homes?

In what ways are Good Shepard Homes a part of the overall history and legacy of the Indian Residential School System?

### **Chapter 3 (Pages 121 – 202)**

What is the “Working Out” or “Outing” System?

What was the goal of the Outing system?

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Indian Residential Schools, the government, and the churches officials claimed that the Outing System provided vocational training and was therefore mostly beneficial to Indigenous youth – do you agree or disagree with this justification?

What are some of the impacts of the Outing System on search and recovery investigations?

What was the File Hills Colony experiment?

What are “trauma” and “resilience”?

How would you define “intergenerational trauma” with respect to Residential Schools?

In what ways does Elie Caribou’s story exemplify the ongoing impacts of forced transfers on search and recovery investigations?

What significant changes happened in the Indian Residential School System after the Second World War?

Where and how can your own actions align with or amplify structures of power that benefit you while oppressing others?

How can we, as individuals and as a nation, engage with the process of reconciliation?

### Excerpts from the Report for Discussion and Exploration

*The process of critically examining a country’s history to promote truth, accountability, justice, reparations, and reconciliation is easily disrupted (page 8).*

*The healing begins with the acknowledgement that painful chapters are essential parts of history; archives then play a crucial role by providing evidence, thereby enabling scholars and citizens to get closer to the truth (Boel, Canavaggio & González Quintana, page 8).*

*...the anti-colonial lens of Indigenous Peoples’ right to truth, justice and reparations... (page 8).*

*...the schools were a source of social order, and that ‘without education and with neglect the Indians would produce an undesirable and often a dangerous element in society... (Duncan [Campbell] Scott, page 10).*

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*The mass human rights violations committed against generations of Indigenous children, their families, and communities extends beyond the abuses and loss of identity and culture that they endured in the Indian Residential School System (page 11).*

*An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all (Judith Butler, page 13).*

*...officials were more concerned with keeping burial costs to a minimum than with ensuring that the deceased children and their families were treated with human dignity and respect. The lives of the children were not only ungrievable, but they were all too often untraceable (page 13).*

*The importance of truth telling in its own right should not be underestimated; it restores the human dignity of victims of violence and calls governments and citizens to account (TRC, page 26).*

*[It] seems like a crime that the country would institutionally construct a system wherein children were likely to die. They built schools that were designed—that had cemeteries attached to them. Who builds a school and puts a cemetery next to it? (Andrew Martindale, page 34).*

*These secrets, shared between children, seem too evil for children to imagine (McCue, page 63).*

*The TRC found that “Aboriginal people traditionally celebrated people who were gay or transgender as gifted, as being the recipients of ‘two spirits’”. The residential schools had particular impacts upon two-spirited people, who faced numerous attacks on their identities (page 126).*

*...Residential schools resembled prisons. Aboriginal children were often treated as if they were offenders who required rehabilitation, while the only thing they were guilty of was being Aboriginal. The regimented life and religious indoctrination imposed on them was designed to ‘rehabilitate’ them by assimilating them into mainstream Canadian society (TRC, page 128).*

*The fear that Indigenous people were a threat to the health of non-Indigenous people prompted the development of an aggressive tuberculosis control program, which included extensive X-ray surveys, the establishment of Indian Hospitals and Sanatoria, and the increased use of other public institutions to confine Indigenous people (page 140).*