

# We Were So Far Away

The Inuit Experience of Residential Schools



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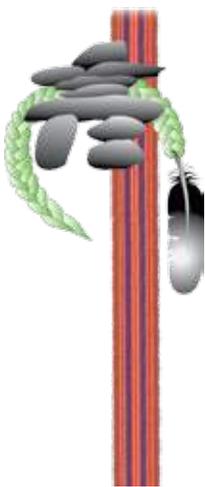
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The Legacy of Hope Foundation is a national Indigenous charitable organization whose purposes are to educate, to raise awareness and understanding of the legacy of residential schools, including the effects and intergenerational impacts on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, and to support the ongoing healing process of Residential School Survivors. Fulfilling this mandate contributes towards reconciliation among generations of Indigenous Peoples and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

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# Background

For over a century, beginning in the mid-1800s and continuing into the late 1990s, Indigenous children in Canada were taken from their homes and communities and were placed in institutions called Indian Residential Schools. These schools were run by religious orders in collaboration with the federal government and were attended by children as young as four years of age. The children were separated from their families, often for years at a time. They were prohibited from speaking their Native languages and practicing their cultural traditions. The vast majority of the over 150,000 children who attended these schools experienced neglect and suffering. The impacts of the sexual, mental and physical abuse, shame, and deprivation endured at these institutions continue to affect generations of Survivors, their families, and communities. Remarkably, in the face of this tremendous adversity, many Survivors and their descendants have retained their ancestral languages and cultures, and continue to work toward healing and reconciliation.

## Why It Matters

Why is this issue important to all Canadians? Why should it matter to those who didn't attend residential school?

**IT MATTERS** because it continues to affect First Nations, Inuit, and Métis families – people from vibrant cultures who are vital contributors to Canadian society.

**IT MATTERS** because it happened here, in a country we call our own – a land considered by many to be a world leader in democracy and human rights.

**IT MATTERS** because the Residential School System is one of the major causes of the disproportionate levels of poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, and violence experienced by Indigenous Peoples – devastating conditions that are felt and experienced by our neighbours, friends, and community members.

**IT MATTERS** because Indigenous communities suffer levels of poverty, illness, and illiteracy comparable to those in developing nations.

**IT MATTERS** because we share this land. We may not be responsible for what happened in the past, but all non-Indigenous Peoples benefit from what First Nations, Inuit, and Métis have had to relinquish. We are responsible for our actions today.

The Residential School System, as defined by the federal government, is limited to 139 schools that operated across Canada between 1831 and 1996. This definition is controversial and excludes provincially administered schools, as well as hostels and day schools. Residential schools existed in almost all provinces and territories, and in the North also took the form of hostels and tent camps. The earliest recognized and longest-running Indian Residential School was the Mohawk Indian Residential School in Brantford, Ontario, which operated from 1831 to 1962. The last federally-run Indian Residential School, Gordon Indian Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, closed in 1996, and was subsequently demolished, marking the end of the residential school era.



# About this Workshop Activity Guide<sup>1</sup>

Thank you for choosing to use this guide with your group. It is our hope that the information and activities contained herein will give both facilitators and participants the resources they need to examine aspects of the Residential School System and to recognize the impact it has had, and continues to have, on generations of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Awareness that the legacies of the residential schools also impact non-Indigenous Peoples is also intended.

## Things to Consider

The histories, memories, and impacts of the Residential School System are complex. There are many details, policies, different perspectives, and unique features that are challenging to grasp fully even after years of study. These activities represent a first step for many of us in exploring these stories and legacies.

Here are some important things to think about as you prepare to deliver these activities.

1. **No one can know everything that happened at the residential schools.** Try not to position yourself as an “expert.” Even if you have a connection to the content, try to remain open to the possibility that participants may have more knowledge or experience than you.
2. **There are few generalizations that can automatically apply to all residential schools.** Each school, in its particular location, under its particular administration, and at a particular time, had unique features. It is important to listen for, recognize, and discuss differences. This should be made clear to participants.
3. **Residential schools in some parts of the North were not in operation for as long as schools in other regions of Canada.** This means that in some places, fewer generations of children attended residential schools. This does not diminish or simplify the experience of students and their families from the North. It does mean that their experience was different. For example, a greater number of Inuit students were able to retain their traditional language and cultural knowledge despite attendance at residential schools.
4. **Individual stories and experiences are so diverse that we cannot label one group of people “victims” and others “perpetrators.”** It is easy to emphasize the negative experiences of former students of residential schools and not give due attention to the difficult realities that teachers and parents encountered. Also, it is important to note that some students had positive experiences. Another layer of complexity is that, in some instances, student-on-student abuse occurred.
5. **Some of the content in these activities deals with difficult subjects and emotional responses may be triggered in participants as a result.** It is vital to create a supportive environment when presenting these materials – one in which participants can express their feelings and thoughts openly.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from *The Residential School System in Canada: Understanding the Past – Seeking Reconciliation – Building Hope for Tomorrow*. Second Edition © 2013. Government of the Northwest Territories, Government of Nunavut, and the Legacy of Hope Foundation.



## Dealing with Tough Stuff

Discussing the history of residential schools frequently involves being confronted with stories of traumatic experiences such as separation from family, mistreatment and neglect, abuse of many kinds, and children who did not survive. This kind of content can be referred to as “difficult knowledge” or “tough stuff.” While these experiences may seem to be from the distant past, they may provoke strong emotions and feel close to home today. Strong feelings may well up unexpectedly or seemingly without explanation and may connect to experiences individuals have had themselves, or manifest as “vicarious trauma” (the transfer of trauma from the victim/survivor onto the “witness,” or person who is hearing their story).

The impacts of the residential schools continue into the present and can be seen in some Indigenous families and communities. These can manifest in a variety of ways including a lack of parenting skills, domestic abuse, substance abuse/addictions, disconnection with family, lack of language and/or cultural skills, and suicide, among others. It may be difficult to raise these issues when there are participants who are, or may be, directly affected by these situations. However, naming and talking about these issues openly is part of breaking the cycle of trauma.

Many former students have shown courage in speaking out, resiliency while on their healing journeys, and willingness to participate in the reconciliation process. They have given us – all Canadians – their memories and stories as gifts so that we can be better informed in the present and contribute to constructing a better future. While it is sometimes difficult to make sense of what happened, listening is an important act of respect and support.

## Self Care

It is important that facilitators practice self care for their own well-being and because they are responsible for teaching this material and supporting participants through it.

Facilitators may find this role to be emotionally difficult or burdensome. Please keep in mind that these activities can be an important part of a learning, reconciliation, and healing process. With support and assistance from colleagues and other community members, this learning experience can be a safe and powerful one for everybody.

# Rubric of Activities

Activity	Activity Name	Description	Key Competencies	Key Activities	Indigenous Pedagogy	Participatory Experiences
1	Interpreting Identity Through Art	Participants make their own artwork that interprets poetry	Historical literacy Cultural literacy Creative expression	Reading poetry by Inuit and examining works of art by Inuit  Interpreting poetry to create new works of art	Sharing Visual learning Observing	Listening Making Empathizing
2	Bearing Witness	Participants listen to the testimonies of Residential School Survivors and make works of art that reflect their understanding of what the Survivor experienced	Historical literacy Cultural literacy Creative expression	Viewing a video  Creating word art poetry  Creating new works of art	Observing Sharing Listening Visual learning	Listening Making Empathizing



## **Activity 1**



# Activity 1

## Interpreting Identity Through Art

Using poetry and examples of visual arts, participants will learn about how Inuit had to adjust, within a very short period of time, to changes in their ways of life. They will then create their own works of art based on the poem, *Walking Both Sides of an Invisible Border*, by Inuit artist and poet, Alooook Ipellie.

### Duration

60 minutes

### Age level

12 and up

### Supplies needed

- One copy of the Alooook Ipellie poem for each participant.
- One copy of the artwork images for each participant.
- A variety of art supplies – markers, pencil crayons, pastels, modelling clay, paper.

### Facilitator preparation

1. Review the Residential School System Northern Timeline that can be found at [weweresofarway.ca/timeline/](http://weweresofarway.ca/timeline/).
2. Visit [wherearethechildren.ca](http://wherearethechildren.ca) to learn more about the history and legacy of the Residential School System.
3. Review the poem and the artwork images. Make copies of both for each participant.
4. Review the biography of Alooook Ipellie.
5. Distribute art supplies.

### Assess

- Participants' knowledge about Inuit and the Residential School System in general.
- Students' knowledge about Inuit art.
- If the participants already use art for their own personal expression and, if so, how (facilitator to pose the question).



### Activate

- Distribute the poem and the artwork images.

### Explore

- Provide a brief overview of the Residential School System Timeline. Refer to key points on the timeline and explain that one of the most unique aspects of the Inuit experience of residential schools was the rapid rate of change in the North.
- Read the short biography of Alootook Ipellie to the participants.
- Examine and discuss the artwork images and the brief biography of each artist.
- Have participants select one or several stanzas of the poem to illustrate. They will also be asked to choose an artist whose style they will adopt, or they can use their own creativity and not reference the style of the Inuit artists included in the activity.

### Close

- Participants can choose to present their artwork to the group and explain why they chose the stanza and artwork style.
- The facilitator will then ask participants to reflect upon and share how making their own works of art impacts their understanding of and empathy for what Ipellie was describing in his poem.

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## Alootook Ipellie Biography

Alootook Ipellie was a poet, writer, editor, translator, journalist, cartoonist, and artist. He was born in the hunting camp of Nuvuququq on Baffin Island in 1951. His father, Joanisse, died when Alootook was a toddler, and his mother, Napatchie, moved the family to Frobisher Bay (now Iqaluit). Alootook received a westernized education in Iqaluit, Yellowknife, and Ottawa. His formative years were spent trying to adjust to the differences between his traditional nomadic life and the life he experienced in government-created settlements for Inuit. He spent much of his adult life exploring these themes, in writing and in art, until his death in September of 2007 at the age of 56.



# Walking Both Sides of an Invisible Border

## Alootook Ipellie

It is never easy  
Walking with an invisible border  
Separating my left and right foot

I feel like an illegitimate child  
Forsaken by my parents  
At least I can claim innocence  
Since I did not ask to come  
Into this world

Walking on both sides of this  
Invisible border  
Each and everyday  
And for the rest of my life  
Is like having been  
Sentenced to a torture chamber  
Without having committed a crime

Understanding the history of humanity  
I am not the least surprised  
This is happening to me  
A non-entity  
During this population explosion  
In a minuscule world

I did not ask to be born an Inuk  
Nor did I ask to be forced  
To learn an alien culture  
With an alien language  
But I lucked out on fate  
Which I am unable to undo

I have resorted to fancy dancing  
In order to survive each day  
No wonder I have earned  
The dubious reputation of being  
The world's premier choreographer  
Of distinctive dance steps  
That allow me to avoid  
Potential personal paranoia  
On both sides of this invisible border

Sometimes this border becomes so wide  
That I am unable to take another step  
My feet being too far apart  
When my crotch begins to tear apart  
I am forced to invent  
A brand new dance step  
The premiere choreographer  
Saving the day once more

Destiny acted itself out  
Deciding for me where I would come from  
And what I would become

So I am left to fend for myself  
Walking in two different worlds  
Trying my best to make sense  
Of two opposing cultures  
Which are unable to integrate  
Lest they swallow one another whole

Each and everyday  
Is a fighting day  
A war of raw nerves  
And to show for my efforts  
I have a fair share of wins and losses

When will all this end  
This senseless battle  
Between my left foot and right foot

When will the invisible border  
Cease to be

# Images and Biographies



## **Pitseolak Ashoona (1904-1983)**

*Joyful Owl*, 31 x 41.1 cm, stonecut in green on laid japan paper, 1961

© Dorset Fine Arts

Pitseolak was born to Timungiak and Ootochie on Nottingham Island in Nunavut. She was in one of the last generations to follow the traditional life that Inuit in the region had lived for thousands of years. The loss of her husband in the 1940s brought her to artistic expression. She was one of the first Inuit artists to create autobiographical works, first in pencil and later in her preferred medium of coloured felt-tip pen.



## **Pudlo Pudlat (1916-1992)**

*Fox in Camp*, 61.8 x 84.9 cm, colour stonecut and stencil on laid japan paper, 1975

© Dorset Fine Arts

Pudlo was born in the Kimmurut region of Nunavut and spent his early life in the traditional way. He began making art in the early 1960s after settling in Cape Dorset. His first works were carvings but he soon switched to drawing and printmaking using his preferred materials – acrylic wash combined with coloured pencil. He was fascinated with modernity, particularly airplanes, and was keenly aware of the rapid changes that Inuit Peoples and culture were experiencing, particularly in the mid-twentieth century.



**Kenojuak Ashevak (1927-2013)**

*Complex of Birds*, 61 x 66 cm, stonecut in black and blue-green on laid paper, 1960

© Dorset Fine Arts

Kenojuak was born at the camp of Ikirasaq on the southern coast of Baffin Island to Ushuakjuk and Silaqqi. Her father, who was a respected shaman, was killed when Kenojuak was only six years old. She moved to live with her mother's family where she continued to learn traditional skills and crafts. Considered to be one of the pioneers of modern Inuit art, Kenojuak was one of the first Inuit women in Cape Dorset to use drawing for artistic expression. She worked in pencil, coloured pencil, and felt-tip pen, but also created numerous soapstone sculptures and prints.



**Abraham Anghik Ruben (b. 1951)**

*Howling at the Moon II*, Brazilian soapstone, 33.3 x 18.0 x 21.0 cm

Private collection, Woodbridge, Ontario

Photo credit: Kipling Gallery and Silvio Calcagno

Abraham was born in a camp south of Paulatuk in the Northwest Territories, the region of the Inuvialuit. Until the age of eight, Abraham lived on the land with his family. This came to an abrupt end when he was sent away to residential school. Abraham spent the next eleven years in the schools, an experience that will haunt him for the rest of his life and which is the source of many of his artistic images. While Abraham has created prints, drawings, and jewelry, he is best known for his sculptural works.



## **Activity 2**



# Bearing Witness

Participants will bear witness to the Inuit experiences of the Residential School System by actively listening to Survivor testimonies delivered via DVD. Participants will then create a group poem using “impression” words gathered during the testimonies. In part two of the workshop, participants will create a self-portrait – either in the form of poetry or a visual image – that represents who they are as a result of having faced a challenge, or a challenge experienced by someone close to them.

## Duration

60 to 90 minutes

## Age level

12 and up

## Supplies needed

- *We Were So Far Away* video (available on the LHF DVD or website) and a monitor.
- Blank paper and pens/pencils.
- A variety of art supplies – markers, pencil crayons, pastels, modelling clay, paper.

## Facilitator preparation

1. Review the Residential School System Northern Timeline that can found at <http://weweresofaraway.ca/timeline/>.
2. Visit [wherearethekids.ca](http://wherearethekids.ca) to learn more about the history and legacy of the Residential School System.
3. Review the *We Were So Far Away* video (26:05 minutes) in advance.
4. Distribute art supplies.

## Assess

- What participants already know about Inuit and the Residential School System in general.
- How comfortable participants are in sharing their own personal experiences of difficulty and hardship.



### **Activate**

- Distribute art supplies.

### **Explore**

- Provide a brief overview of the Residential School System Timeline. Refer to key points on the timeline and explain that one of the most unique aspects of the Inuit experience of residential schools was the rapid rate of change in the North.
- Before starting playback of the video, explain to the participants that the content is divided into nine sections (Leaving Home, First Experiences, Silenced Languages, Dislocation, Life in Residential School, Indoctrination, Returning Home, Cultural Loss, Healing and Reconciliation).
- Explain that participants will be asked to write down one word at the end of each section that describes what they felt as they were listening to the testimony, or a word that could describe the feelings of the Survivor.
- After the video has finished, have the participants turn their words into a poem or piece of word art.
- As an additional activity, participants can use the art supplies to create an image, poem, or other creative form to express their own challenging life experiences. The goal is to use art to express emotion (within comfortable limits).

### **Close**

- Participants can choose to present and discuss their artwork to the group.
- Ask participants to reflect upon the testimonies of the Survivors and to make personal connections with the sense of loss, dislocation, and fear that they experienced. In contrast, ask participants to think of examples of resiliency, strength, cultural revitalization, and healing that are taking place today in our country.
- Participants can expand their understanding to recognize how the legacies of the Residential School System are visible in Inuit communities today and also how healing and cultural reclamation are happening.

“Each person is important, your culture is important, no one can take your culture away from you no matter how much or how hard they try, and if you know your culture you can learn and achieve anything in the world. To know your culture is to know yourself and when you know yourself then you can achieve anything.”

Salamiva Weetaltuk, Survivor

