Are Boarding Schools Safe for Children? Using Attachment Theory as a Starting Point

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Canada’s Indian Residential Schools

The Canadian conscience has been assaulted over the past decade with accusations of deliberate abuse and neglect visited upon generations of First Nations children through residential schools. These schools were initially conceived and openly propounded as a legitimate form of bettering the lives of Canada’s native peoples through deculturation. As Prime Minister John A. MacDonald argued in the House of Commons,

When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with his parents who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. (as quoted in Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2012, pp. 5-6)

It can perhaps be argued that, when viewed in its historical context, this goal was a significant improvement on many other colonial forms of dealing with vanquished and “inferior” indigenous peoples, such as genocide and slavery. However, from a current-day perspective, we now look at the actions of those governments, churches, and society and recognize the horror, not simply the physical, sexual, and other overt abuses which were perpetrated on children under their care, but also the psychological cruelty endured by individuals, families, and communities across generations. Canada’s Indian Residential Schools often were not safe places, physically, emotionally, or culturally, for its residents. That schools, centres for learning, understanding, and betterment, have the potential to be the medium for mistreatment and exploitation is troubling. And while the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has an immense mandate, Canadian society can reassure itself that by acknowledging past actions, apologizing, and attempting to make amends, we are beginning to deal with its impacts on individuals and communities throughout Canada’s First Nations.
We may also think to ourselves, “I’m glad that those schools are now in the past and that such things do not occur anymore.” However, there continue to be many residential schools for children operating in Canada and throughout the world. Are these safe places for the children who attend them? What lessons can be learned from the devastation wrought by the Indian Residential Schools? The following discussion will present and examine some of the issues surrounding the use of boarding schools for educating children.¹

**Personal Involvement**

There are two significant events in my life which preclude me from any claim of an unbiased approach to this issue. At the age of six I became a boarder at an American international school in north India and continued in boarding for the next two and a half years until my family returned to Canada part way through grade 3. I deem that my experience of boarding was relatively benign—I know of no abuse or mistreatment. Entering boarding at an early age was common and normal amongst my family’s peer group, missionary and international business people. And to add to my potentially prejudiced viewpoint on this topic, as an adult I returned to that same school with my wife and children and worked there for four years in the residences, both the elementary (grades 2-5) and middle school (grades 6-8) dormitories. While there, I became a residence supervisor and was instrumental in developing residential programs, recruiting staff and students, and supporting the advancement of boarding within that school. While working at this school I often stated to colleagues and family that I was somewhat conflicted about my role: while I was a vocal advocate for this school’s boarding program, I was concerned about the developmental legitimacy of boarding for children, especially in the early grades. During my time as a staff member at this prestigious international boarding school I tried

¹ In a previous essay I considered a similar issue, the role which residential schools play in the acculturation and deculturation of its students.
to research best practices for boarding schools, but was unable to locate established criteria or guidelines. This led me to work with colleagues to develop a residential curriculum which served as a guide and philosophy for ‘how to do boarding’ at our school. But the question of whether boarding is in the best interests of the child’s whole development has remained.

**Focus & Definitions**

Residential schools take on many forms and serve many purposes. College preparatory boarding schools will be the primary focus of this discussion. The terms “residential school” and “boarding school” will be used interchangeably and will be defined as schools which, in addition to their formal education program, provide onsite residence, meals, and in loco parentis care for a significant percentage of students throughout the school year. Additionally, the question of boarding being “safe” will be limited to emotional and psychological safety.

**Boarding School Survivors**

In that boarding schools are relatively rare in the Canadian educational setting, it is interesting to consider this topic from a British standpoint where a boarding school education has historically been popular and continues to be desired today (Schaverien, 2004). Despite this esteemed status, various groups are sounding the alarm regarding traditional boarding school systems in Britain. Joy Schaverien (2011), a British Jungian psychotherapist, has proposed a condition called “Boarding School Syndrome”. She argues that adults who experienced boarding school as young children, age eight being common but sometimes as young as six, often suffer significant life-long trauma due to the severing of vital social attachments through early separation from family. This, combined with the potential for bullying and physical or sexual abuse, results in it being difficult for young boarders to form appropriate attachments in the boarding environment, a condition which can continue throughout their lives. While boarders often appear as very outgoing and well-adjusted individuals, Schaverien states that it is often “as
adults that they can begin to recognize and then articulate their experience and, for some, the first time they do so is when they engage in psychotherapy” (p. 139). The outward projections are merely a protective personality structure created as a means of adapting to unmet emotional needs.

Nick Duffell (2011), founder of Boarding School Survivors, also argues that living in the all-encompassing, 24/7 community of a boarding school, separated from family, has a dramatic impact on students, one that carries through to later life. Boarders have to “survive long periods without love amongst other lonely, scared children” (p. 127), yet when one visits “any boarding school … you’ll rarely see unhappy children” (p. 126). Instead, Duffell states, boarders have adopted outward and inward survival techniques by repressing their emotions such that, “smiling faces are in place, mostly for life” (p. 126).

The psychological impact of boarding school on the developing child affects the core of the personality. As a result of the sudden loss of early attachment figures the vulnerable self needs protection. Therefore a form of acquired and defensive encapsulation may occur. (Schaverien, 2004, p. 686)

**Attachment Theory**

In presenting her concerns regarding the use of boarding schools for children, Joy Schaverien (2011) employs the term “attachment” more than 30 times, usually in the context of boarding being dramatically disruptive to early family attachments. It therefore behooves us to consider attachment and the role it plays upon healthy development.

Cunningham and Page (2001) explain that in infancy and early childhood a child’s “social and emotional development requires the presence of a loving, continuous relationship with a specific caregiver(s), the primary function of which is to ensure reliability of care and safety in threatening circumstances” (p. 335). When considering the specific case of foster care of children
over the age of 9 months, it appears that it is the foster parent’s commitment early in the relationship which is the key factor in the formation of positive bonds and attachment (Kobak & Madsen, 2008). Cunningham and Page (2001) describe how a positively functioning attachment to the caregiver enables the child to develop secure internal working models (IWM) which the child uses as a gauge of caregiver reliability. “Internal working models thus make possible the ‘secure base’ phenomenon described by Ainsworth et al. (1978)” (p. 336) with malfunctioning and unpredictable attachments creating an inconsistent or fearful environment for the child resulting in psychological insecurity. Over time, a child will update or revise his/her IWM, however “internal working models tend to retain their essential qualities over time” (p. 336). Thus an individual’s response to new situations, expression of emotions, ability to accommodate the needs of others, and virtually all other fundamental social skills are largely dictated by one’s IWM. “Upon these essential social skills rest the capacities for mutually satisfying social relationships and, indeed, a child's moral development” (p. 336).

Trauma or loss in the lives of infants can, according to Kobak and Madsen (2008), result in attachment difficulties (categorized as disorganized/disoriented, also referred to as D) and this condition accurately “predicts adjustment problems consistently from childhood and through adolescence .... Similar patterns of maladaptation have been identified in adolescents and adults who are classified as ‘unresolved with respect to loss or trauma’” (“The Special Case of Trauma and Loss”, para. 3). The role which separation plays in attachment theory is an obvious area of interest when considering residential schooling situations. Summarizing Bowlby’s overview of attachment theory, Kobak and Madsen state that “an individual’s sense of safety and security is derived from maintaining a bond with an accessible and responsive caregiver” (para. 3). This is of paramount importance for the healthy development of infants and toddlers. Nevertheless, when children up to the age of four who have developed a secure attachment base are separated from
their caregivers, the children respond in three distinct and predictable phases, “protest”, “despair”, and “detachment” ("Children’s Responses to Disruptions, para. 2). Even a well-attached child who reaches the detachment phase does not readily reattach upon the return of the caregiver. The child “showed a striking absence of joy at the mother’s return; instead of enthusiastically greeting her, the detached child was likely to appear apathetic” ("Children’s Responses to Disruptions, para. 5). Attachment theory states that older children and adults demonstrate a parallel response to that of young children.

Older children and adults are likely to perceive threats to a caregiver’s availability when lines of communication are disrupted by prolonged absence, emotional disengagement, or signals of rejection or abandonment. As a result, disrupted lines of communications produce feelings of anxiety, anger, and sadness similar to those that have been documented in young children’s reactions to physical separation. ("Introduction", para. 4)

It has been suggested that a child’s distress is significantly lowered when relationships and lines of communication are unrestricted and well established. “Open communication continues to be an important marker of security in parent–child relationships (Adam et al., 2004) [and] in parent-adolescent relationships (Allen et al., 2003; Kobak & Cole, 1994; Roisman, Madsen, Hennighausen, Sroufe, & Collins, 2001)” (Kobak & Madsen, 2008, “Threats to Caregiver Availability”, para. 2).

Tracing attachment theory’s impact on school-age and older children is difficult due to the ever expanding systems of interaction in the young person’s life. However, there are norms which can be seen in positively attached individuals. According to Marvin and Britner (2008) young people continue to make extensive use of attachment figures during middle childhood and into adolescence despite the increase in influence and roles of non-caretaking adults and peers. As one becomes more capable of protecting and caring for oneself one can
tolerate greater separation from one’s attachment figure; however having access to that person remains vital. “Availability of the attachment figure, rather than physical proximity, becomes the set goal of the attachment system in older children and adults” (“Changes in Attachment Behavior”, para. 4). As with toddlers, even adolescents use their secure parent figures as bases from which to safely explore and further develop their autonomy. “The degree, however, to which adolescents’ movements away from parental proximity and control are interspersed with adaptive, temporary returns to that safe haven is greatly underestimated in the developmental literature” (“Changes in Attachment Behaviour, para. 7).

**Implications of Attachment Theory for Residential Schooling**

While only gaining significant attention in the social sciences fields since the 1980s, attachment theory has proved to be an insightful and accurate means of studying human relationships, and as such offers a “visible and empirically grounded conceptual framework” (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008, Preface, para. 2) for evaluating whether boarding schools are safe places for children. An important fact to keep in mind is that, according to Marvin and Britner (2008) the study of attachment theory, particularly as it relates to middle childhood, has had very little study of normative development, being focused thus far instead on children in treatment or adverse situations. This may limit the degree to which conclusions may be drawn but should not bar discussion and research into this question.

In light of the fundamental role which attachment plays in the healthy development of children and adolescents, and fully recognizing the troubling long-term impacts of broken attachments sadly demonstrated through Canada’s Indian Residential Schools, there are many important issues which families and schools must carefully weigh so as to ensure the emotional health and well-being of the children.

The following are some of questions which families should actively consider:
• Attending a boarding school will, at a minimum, necessitate a significant modification in the child’s access to his/her parents. Attachment theory holds that availability and open communication are key features of enabling children to deal with stressful situations and that this continues throughout adolescence. What are the child’s preferred ways of accessing parents? Can these be replicated/modified in a boarding situation?

• A child’s internal working model governs his/her sense of security and parental reliability. What steps should be taken prior to entering boarding to help support and refine the child’s IWM?

• Serious questions have been raised as to whether boarding for young children is developmentally appropriate. Absence from primary caregivers may result in detachment with subsequent reattachment being challenging. What experience has the child of being away from parents for days at a time? How have the child and family handled the reunion?

• Trauma and loss can result in a child having attachment issues. How can the family acknowledge the trauma of boarding separation while tangibly demonstrating continued love and support?

In offering residential care a school assumes a de facto parent role. Merely caring for the physical needs of its students is insufficient for a boarding school. Instead it too must ask itself some important questions:

• Since access to primary caregivers is fundamental to healthy attachment and personal well-being, what steps is the school taking to maintain, support, and encourage student access to their parents? This must include adolescents.
• Schaverien has raised serious issues regarding boarding for young children, and attachment theory suggests that, developmentally, children age 5 to 12 (middle childhood) may require direct and immediate access to parental figures depending on how developed the individual’s IWM has become to accommodate physical separation. In light of this, at what age will the school begin its boarding program? Since chronological age is not necessarily a predictor of emotional development, how will the school assess whether a child is ready to enter boarding?

• Studies of children in foster care indicate that a key factor in the formation of their attachment is the foster parent’s early commitment to the relationship. Are school staff collectively and individually initiating care for their students? Do students respond to this? How is care and commitment shown beyond the academics? Does the student’s IWM reflect that he/she is cared for and supported?

• A significant number of children will have experienced attachment difficulties in their younger years and will have internalized these encounters into their IWMs and thus will have more of a challenge making positive attachments with staff at the boarding school. What measures can the school take to encourage connections and attachment for this group of children?

• Severed attachments to primary caregivers can result in protest, despair, and detachment. Are staff aware of these phases and their manifestations at different ages and across the sexes? How can/do staff respond?

• Transitions between home and school, as well as departing peers and staff, are each forms of loss and trauma repeated multiple times throughout a school year. How do staff
prepare students for such change and support them through it? What traditions and celebrations are used to acknowledge transitions?

**Conclusion**

Many students attend boarding schools in order to receive an exemplary education—academic, athletic, social, moral—and to be ready for the challenges and potentials of post-secondary education and life beyond. The opportunities provided and skills developed in boarding schools will assist many to become business, community, and political leaders of the future. It would be tragic if all of the advantages an individual gained in a boarding school education came at the cost of developing a protective personality structure due to unmet emotional needs and of thus becoming a fatality of boarding school syndrome. By heeding the sad lessons being taught by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission that separating children from attachment figures and family is destructive and abusive, the boarding schools of today, and of the future, will recognize that the family and boarding school must work together to be the safe base from which children may explore themselves, the community, and the world beyond. Attachment theory may be an enlightening guide.
References


