

SUGARCANE

Learning and Dialogue Guide

CAUTION

The information provided in this resource is intended to support the education of students and Canadians broadly, respecting the experiences of survivors, Indigenous families and communities. This information may be upsetting for some. If you require immediate support, please contact the following:

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

SUGARCANE

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Guide Overview

Intent

The Sugarcane Learning and Dialogue Guide was created to support teachers and students in understanding both the structural and deeply personal impacts of the Canadian Indian Residential School system as they engage with the film *Sugarcane*. The guide is intended to provide historical context, varied perspectives and prompt constructive dialogue in educational settings. Before watching or assigning the film, we encourage teachers to be aware of their students' backgrounds and connection to the subject matter. All Indigenous people are impacted by colonization and the residential school system, and many have direct family experience of intergenerational trauma. It is also important to be cognizant that non-Indigenous students may have been impacted by some of the issues presented in the film, including physical and sexual abuse.

Grade Levels

Though we defer to teachers and communities to determine readiness to engage with this material, we recommend teaching with the film for high school students and above, noting that the content and discussions may trigger trauma responses in people of any age.

Health Supports

We recommend that teachers contact mental health or guidance counsellors in the school or community in advance of the screening, and that they be available to students afterwards. We also recommend inviting an elder or a member of the local Indigenous community to offer prayer, song, or smudge before and after the screening. After the film, we encourage teachers to give students a short break to process.

About the Film

A stunning tribute to the resilience of Native people and their way of life, the Oscar-nominated documentary *Sugarcane*, from directors Julian Brave NoiseCat and Emily Kassie, is an epic cinematic portrait of a community during a moment of international reckoning.

In 2021, evidence of potential unmarked graves was discovered on the grounds of an Indian residential school in British Columbia run by the Catholic Church. After years of silence, the forced separation, assimilation and abuse many children experienced at these segregated boarding schools was brought to light, sparking a national outcry against a system rife with abuse, designed to assimilate and disempower Indigenous communities. Set amidst a groundbreaking investigation, *Sugarcane* illuminates the beauty of a community breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma and finding the strength to persevere.

Sugarcane premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, where Julian and Emily won the Directing Award. It has since been honoured with more than 50 nominations and over 30 wins including two Critics Choice Awards, the National Board of Review award for best documentary and an Academy Award nomination.



Directors' Statement

This film was born of haunting truths and mythic forces. It was made through the combined perspectives of insiders and outsiders.

From the outset, we knew that *Sugarcane* needed to convey how the past is present for the survivors of residential schools and their descendants, and how the death toll from a century-long colonial effort by the Church and government continues to rise. So, for nearly three years, we lived alongside participants, feeling the rawness of their pain and bearing witness to the bravery in their resilience, while documenting a vibrant world in a moment of historic reckoning.

Throughout, we were drawn to the contradictions we saw in the lives of our subjects: of faith and culture; of the beauty and weight of home and family, when those things have been so fundamentally broken; and of the pursuit of truth, which can both liberate and kill. But we also connected to the parts of this experience that transcended: of the humanity that called the film's participants to a greater, lasting purpose at the moment it mattered most; of the connection between departed ancestors and loved ones and the people they left behind; and of the forces that, for some reason, brought us together to tell this story.

To tell that kind of story, our filmmaking aimed to be at once intimate and epic. We took time to revere the awe-inspiring mountains, lakes and rivers of British Columbia and the dusky history of the Vatican—the Indigenous homelands and the imperial metropole that besieged them. We were alongside the film's participants as they dug graves for their friends, searched for painful truths in the recesses of their memories, and mustered the courage to confront representatives of the Church, the government, and their own families. You can feel their hesitation, the twitch of their fingers, the catch in their breath as they struggle to confront their deepest secrets and give voice to their shame.

We approached this project with common values and a shared vision—based as much on heart as intellect, and on vulnerability as much as experience. At many turns, making this film was the most significant experience of our lives. It brought us closer to Creation and whatever that thing is that is beyond and greater than ourselves.

Residential schools nearly annihilated the Indian way of life—a life imperiled by the pain and injustices of colonialism, yes, but also, overwhelmingly, a beautiful life full of family, culture and love. Our film aims to transform these dark truths into powerful legends that can endure and be remembered by future generations.

- Julian Brave NoiseCat & Emily Kassie

II. Teacher Prep

Preparing the Setting

Creating a space for diverse perspectives and knowledge sharing without fear will promote dialogue and critical thinking. The aim is to cultivate a respectful group dynamic in which all students' contributions are encouraged and valued, regardless of racial, religious, political and socioeconomic differences.

We recommend the following for a post-screening dialogue:

- Adopt a shared set of principles and guidelines for the group
- Arrange seats in a circle or horseshoe so participants can see each other.
- Provide tissues, water, and quiet breakout areas for those who need space
- Have a support person available if possible
- Remind students that there is no place for derogatory comments or any disparagement
- Invoke Chatham House rules: what is said in the space remains in the space Encourage "I" statements

Indigenous Community Engagement

While this guide uses the term "Indigenous" broadly, perspectives, protocols, and knowledge differ among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Educators and group leaders are encouraged to engage with the Indigenous community local to their classroom and, where possible, invite them to participate in the screening and discussion.

Although *Sugarcane* focuses on Williams Lake First Nation, St. Joseph's Mission Indian Residential School, and the Secwépemc, Chilcotin, and Dakelh children who were forced to attend, its learnings carry relevance for Indigenous peoples across Canada.

A Note on Numbers

For more than 150 years, Canada's Indian Residential School system forcibly removed tens of thousands of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis children—some as young as four—from their families and communities. The federally funded system operated from the early 1830s until the last school closed in 1996. A 1920 amendment to the Indian Act made attendance compulsory, vastly expanding the network of schools. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police enforced this mandate as truant officers. The federal government currently recognizes 140 Indian Residential Schools.

Earlier iterations of these institutions predated Confederation, with some dating back to the 1620s. Sixty-two additional schools were excluded from the 2006–07 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) due to factors such as their operating dates, the authorities that ran them, their locations (including within Indian Hospitals), or their funding structures. The last IRSSA-recognized residential school, Kivalliq Hall, closed in 1997.

Canada's system was not unique. The United States operated a parallel network of 417 federally funded Indian Boarding Schools that removed tens of thousands of Indigenous children from their families. Similar assimilation regimes existed in Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and elsewhere—a global pattern of separating Indigenous children from their families and suppressing their cultures.

A Note on Denialism

In 2021, after conducting ground-penetrating radar (GPR) surveys, several First Nations announced the discovery of probable graves at former residential school sites across Canada. GPR cannot identify bodies; it registers soil disturbances that may indicate graves. These findings aligned with decades of survivor testimony, archival evidence, and Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) research showing that many children died at residential schools and were buried onsite—often in unmarked or neglected cemeteries, or without their families' knowledge. Few sites have been excavated, largely due to cultural protocols, trauma, mistrust, and the complexity of investigating historic burials.

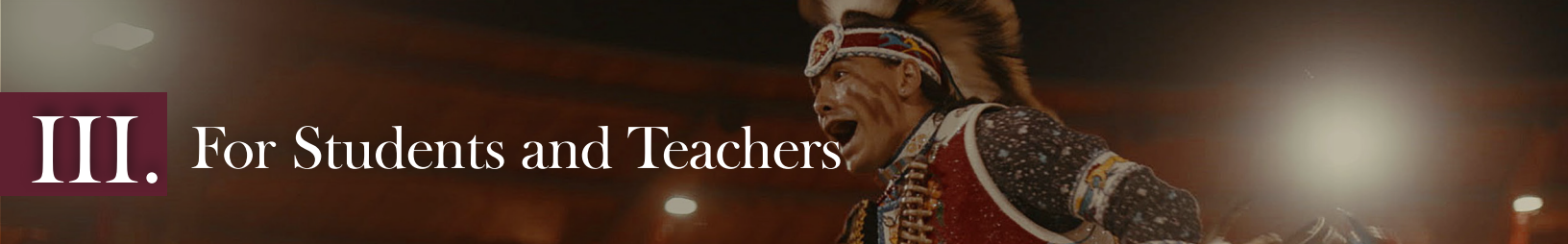
II. Teacher Prep

Some early media coverage used terms like “mass graves” or “bodies found,” even as Indigenous communities used more precise language such as “suspected graves” or “anomalies.” The gap between what GPR can detect and what the media sometimes implied generated public confusion and fuelled a denialist movement that argues the absence of exhumed remains disproves the graves’ existence or minimizes the harms of the residential schools. Denialists often seize on technical uncertainty to dismiss a well-documented historical reality: thousands of children died at residential schools; cemeteries were neglected or destroyed; and survivors consistently recounted stories of classmates who disappeared or never returned home.

We encourage reframing these conversations away from disputes over “unmarked graves,” and toward the deeper truths of the residential school system itself—the forced separation of children from their families, the cultural eradication the system sought to impose, the widespread abuse and neglect within these institutions, and the profound intergenerational impacts that persist today.

Maps and Other Resources

- The National Center for Truth and Reconciliation provides a map of all the residential schools with additional information <https://nctr.ca/records/view-your-records/archival-map/>
- National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation’s Residential School Timeline resource includes primary source documents and photos. Explore more primary source documents in the [NCTR’s Exhibits database](https://nctr.ca/exhibits/residential-school-timeline/). <https://nctr.ca/exhibits/residential-school-timeline/>
- Canadian Geographic’s “Paths to Reconciliation” provides a helpful [map](#) of the unrecognized Indian residential schools.
- The Legacy of Hope Foundation has curated a series of Survivors Testimonies for Canadians to hear and learn more. <https://legacyofhope.ca/wherearethekids/stories/>
- Connie Walker’s Pulitzer-winning podcast *Stolen: Surviving St. Michael’s*. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2BIIRP1ZQRKq2lxfpLUhZA>



III. For Students and Teachers

The Origins of Indian Residential Schools and Indian Reserves

The residential school system in Canada emerged from early colonial efforts to assimilate Indigenous peoples and control their lands. Beginning with church-run mission schools in the 17th century, these institutions were formalized in the 19th century through partnerships between Christian churches and the federal government. The system developed alongside broader assimilation policies—most notably the Indian Act of 1876, which granted the government sweeping authority over Indigenous life and sought to erode Indigenous governance, languages, and cultural practices. By the 1880s, residential schools had become a central tool of this project, explicitly designed to separate Indigenous children from their families and “civilize” them according to EuroCanadian norms. Rooted in colonialism, racism, and beliefs in settler superiority, this ideology shaped the system and the profound harms it inflicted for more than a century.

The residential school and reserve systems were interconnected components of the same colonial strategy aimed at dispossessing Indigenous peoples, controlling their movements, and enforcing assimilation. The reserve system confined Indigenous nations to small parcels of land, opening vast territories to settlement and resource extraction while making communities easier for government agents to monitor. Residential schools relied on this structure: compulsory attendance could be enforced only because the state had direct authority over reserve families, and Indian Agents used that authority—along with threats, ration withholding, and the RCMP—to compel parents to surrender their children.

Both systems operated through isolation. The reserve system isolated communities from settler society and, in some regions, restricted mobility through the pass system, an administrative policy requiring Indigenous people to apply for a pass from the local Indian agent to leave the reserve. The pass would note their destination and time of return, and failure to obtain one could lead to detention. Residential schools isolated children from their families, languages, and cultural knowledge. Together, they aimed to weaken Indigenous identity and disrupt cultural transmission between generations.

Many scholars, Indigenous leaders, and international human rights bodies have concluded that Canada’s residential school system meets the definition of cultural genocide—policies intended to destroy the political, social, linguistic, and cultural foundations of a group.

Abuse was widespread across residential schools, where children faced physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological harm. Many suffered malnutrition, neglect, overcrowding, and disease, while sexual abuse by priests, brothers, and staff was pervasive. Children were also forced into work that frequently replaced schooling.

Survivors began pursuing litigation in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to the landmark 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which provided compensation to survivors. Criminal prosecutions also occurred, though unevenly: some priests, brothers, and school staff were charged and convicted, while many others escaped accountability due to secrecy, destroyed records, the deaths of perpetrators, or the barriers survivors faced in coming forward.

III. For Students and Teachers

Government Perspectives

The following quotes represent the perspectives of Canadian government officials and Catholic leadership during the period in which the residential school system was developed.

“It is because you do not feel or know the value of education; you would not give up your idle roving habits, to enable your children to receive instruction. Therefore, you remain poor, ignorant and miserable. It is found you cannot govern yourselves. And if left to be guided by your own judgement, you will never be better off than you are at the present; and your children will ever remain in ignorance. It has therefore been determined that your children shall be sent to Schools, where they will forget their Indian habits and be instructed in all the necessary arts of civilized life, and become one with your white brethren.”

— *Indian Affairs Superintendent P.G. Anderson, in 1846, at the General Council of Indian Chiefs and Principal Men in Orillia, Ont. The first federally run residential schools opened two years later in Alderville, Ont.*

“If anything is to be done with the Indian, we must catch him very young.”

— *Davin Report, recommending residential schools, 1879.*

“We instill in them a pronounced distaste for the native life so that they will be humiliated when reminded of their origin.”

— *Bishop Vital-Justin Grandin, Oblate missionary in a letter to the Canadian government, 1875.*

“When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages... He is simply a savage who can read and write.”

“The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change.”

— *John A. Macdonald, House of Commons Debates, 1883, arguing for off-reserve industrial schools.*

“I want to get rid of the Indian problem... Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department... if it means that the Indians must be compelled to send their children to school, then I think we must compel them.”

— *Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, 1913 – 1932*

III. For Students and Teachers



Survivor Perspectives

The following quotes represent the perspectives of Indigenous survivors of residential school today.

"My time there, often it was lonely, we were hungry, we were afraid."

— Saa Hiil Thut, St'át'imc First Nation, BC, Kamloops Indian Residential School

"They would just start beating you and lose control and hurl you against the wall, throw you on the floor, kick you, punch you..."

— Geraldine Bob, Esk'etemc First Nation, BC, Kamloops Indian Residential School

"I was called, 'Hey, 39. Where's 39?' ... I was 39."

— Bernice Jack, Cwixwman First Nation, BC, Kamloops Indian Residential School

"On their table they had beautiful food, and our table, we had slop."

— Julianna Alexander, Secwépemc Nation, BC, Kamloops Indian Residential School

"I remember the one young fellow that hung himself in the gym... and they just left him hanging there."

— Antonette White, Kuper Island Residential School

"After I was taken there they took off my clothes and then they deloused me ... 'the dirty, no-good-for-nothing savages, lousy.' And then they cut off my beautiful hair..."

— Campbell Papequash, Key First Nation, Saskatchewan, St. Philip's Residential School

"We had no place to drink water... and I was one of them that drank water from the toilet bowl..."

— Ron Windsor, Alert Bay Indian Residential School

"Every day was, you were in constant fear that... it wasn't you today that was going to be the target, the victim."

— Timothy Henderson, Residential Schools in Manitoba

"I learned the fear, how to be so fearful at six years old... I was scared and fearful all the time, and that stayed with me throughout my life."

— Shirley Waskewitch, Onion Lake Cree Nation, Saskatchewan, St. Anthony's Indian Residential School

"When I first got hit by the nuns, it was really devastating 'cause how can they hit me when my parents didn't hit me...?"

— Isabelle Whitford, Keeseekoowenin First Nation, Manitoba Sandy Bay Residential School in Manitoba

"A sister... started hitting me all over my body... I began to cry... and this infuriated her more. She got a black strap and hit me some more."

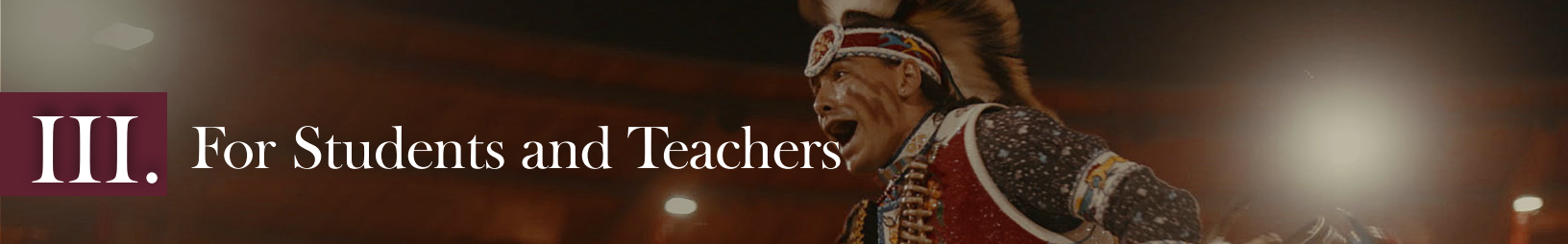
— Marcel Guiboche, Sapotaweyak Cree Nation, Manitoba, Pine Creek Indian Residential School, Manitoba

"Even though... it spread in the whole school like wildfire... measles, mumps, sores, bedbugs... we just had to live with it."

— Roger Cromarty, Sioux Lookout Zone First Nation, Sioux Lookout Residential School

"They took my language. They took it right out of my mouth. I never spoke it again."

— Rose Dorothy Charlie, Chehalis Band and Sto:lo Nation, Carcross Indian Residential School



III. For Students and Teachers

Timeline: Key Legislation, Policy, and Events

1830s-1860s — Pre-Confederation

British colonial officials started setting aside land for Indigenous peoples, often on less desirable tracts, laying the groundwork for future reserves.

1831 — Mohawk Institute (Brantford, Ontario) Opens

Often cited as the first institution in what became the Canadian residential school system, marking the beginning of over a century of church- and state-run assimilationist schooling.

1867 — Constitution Act

Gave the federal government exclusive authority over “Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians,” solidifying federal control over Indigenous affairs.

1876 — Indian Act

This landmark legislation consolidated previous policies, brought all First Nations under federal jurisdiction, defined “Status Indians,” and governed virtually all aspects of reserve life, including land management, governance, and culture. Under the Indian Act, Indigenous peoples were wards of the state. It also authorized the federal government to create and regulate industrial and residential schools.

1879 — Davin Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half Breeds

Nicholas Flood Davin was sent to visit the Carlisle Industrial School in Pennsylvania to determine why the Americans were so much more successful in their assimilation agenda than the Dominion of Canada.

1883 — Government Authorization for Residential Schools

John A. Macdonald’s government formalized the creation of three federally funded residential schools. While not a statute, this is an official administrative order that begins the federal system.

1885 — Indian Act Amendments Ban Indigenous Ceremonies

The federal government criminalizes cultural and spiritual practices such as the Potlatch and Sun Dance, reflecting the broader system of cultural suppression that residential schools enforced.

1907 — Dr. P.H. Bryce’s “National Crime” Report

The Medical Inspector for Indian Affairs exposes severe health crises, overcrowding, and high death rates in residential schools, warning that the system is causing preventable deaths on a large scale.

1920 — Indian Act Amendment: Mandatory Attendance for Ages 7–15

Attendance at Indian Residential Schools becomes legally compulsory by statute, with criminal penalties. The government and police can legally remove children from their homes.

1951 — Indian Act Revision

Provides framework for “day schools,” though residential schools still dominate.

1961 — Federal Voting Rights Granted

Status Indians gain the right to vote Federally without losing their status.

1969 — Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy (“White Paper”)

An influential policy document proposing to eliminate the Indian Act and federal responsibility sparking Indigenous resistance and coinciding with the beginning of the federal takeover of schools from churches.

1969 — Government Assumes Full Control of Residential Schools

Churches begin transferring authority to the federal government.

III. For Students and Teachers



1973 — Supreme Court of Canada: Calder v. British Columbia

Recognizes Indigenous land rights in Canadian law.

1982 — Constitution Act, Section 35

Codifies all prior treaty rights as constitutional rights, allowing challenges to decisions about land, resources, or laws.

1986–1990 — Church Apologies and Court Cases against Priests Begin

1996 — Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) Final Report

Documented residential school harms and urged a public investigation, redress, and a restructuring of Crown–Indigenous relations.

1998 — Gathering Strength: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan A

formal federal acknowledgement of the harms of residential schools.

2001 — Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada Established

A federal department is created to manage the growing number of abuse claims, support survivors, and develop a national framework for reparations, setting the stage for the IRSSA.

2003 — National Resolution Framework Introduced

Canada implements a coordinated approach to litigation, alternative dispute resolution, commemoration, and mental health supports for survivors, further laying groundwork for the 2006 IRSSA.

2005–2006 — Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA)

The largest class-action settlement in Canadian history.

2008 — Official Federal Apology

Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivers Canada’s formal apology in Parliament.

2015 — Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report (TRC)

Formed under the IRSSA in 2008, the Commission presents its final report and the Calls to Action, outlining concrete steps for governments, institutions, and the public to address the legacy of residential schools.

2021 — Discovery of probable unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School

2021 — Bill C-15: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (UNDRIP Act)

Begins harmonizing federal law with UNDRIP principles, including Indigenous control of education.

2021 — National Day for Truth and Reconciliation Established (September 30)

Following TRC Call to Action 80, Canada creates a federal statutory day of remembrance to honor survivors, lost children, and the ongoing impacts of the residential school system.

2022 — Papal Apology Delivered in Canada

Pope Francis visits Indigenous communities across Canada and issues an apology on behalf of the Catholic Church for its role in operating residential schools, following an earlier apology delivered in Rome.

2022–2024 — Provincial Acts for Indigenous Education & Reconciliation

Several provinces pass legislation that supports Indigenous language revitalization, mandates teaching residential school history in the curriculum and supports burial site investigations.

IV. Terminology



Assimilation

A government policy aimed at absorbing Indigenous peoples into Euro-Canadian society by suppressing their cultures, languages, and social structures.

Band (First Nation Band)

A governing unit defined under the Indian Act, consisting of a group of First Nation citizens who share a common identity and have reserve lands set aside for their use.

Cultural Genocide

The deliberate destruction of the political, social, linguistic, and cultural foundations of a group so it can no longer exist as a distinct people.

Day Scholar

A child who attended a residential school during the day but returned home at night, still subjected to cultural suppression and often abuse.

Dispossession

The forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands to enable settler expansion, resource extraction, and state control.

First Nation

An Indigenous group in Canada, distinct from Inuit and Métis peoples, each with its own governance systems, cultures, and traditional territories.

Genocide

The United Nations Genocide Convention Article II states that “genocide” means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Ground-Penetrating Radar (GPR)

A surveying technology that detects subsurface soil disturbances that may indicate graves but cannot confirm human remains.

Indian Act

A federal law governing most aspects of life for Status Indians and First Nations communities, including reserves, band governance, and residential schools.

Indian Agent

A government official appointed to enforce the Indian Act on reserves and compel attendance at residential schools.

Indian Day School

A government-funded, church-run school where Indigenous children lived at home but still faced cultural bans, harsh discipline, and widespread abuse.

Indian Hospital

A segregated medical institution for Indigenous peoples that often subjected patients to mistreatment, coerced procedures, and poor conditions.

Indian Reserve

A tract of land set aside under the Indian Act for the use of a First Nation, created through colonial policies that displaced Indigenous peoples from their territories.

Indian Residential School

A government-funded, church-run boarding school designed to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children by separating them from their families, languages, and cultures.

Indigenous

A collective term referring to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, each with distinct histories, cultures, and identities.

IV. Terminology



Inuit

An Indigenous people whose homeland, Inuit Nunangat, spans Arctic regions of Canada and whose culture, language, and governance systems are distinct from First Nations and Métis peoples.

Intergenerational Trauma

Trauma passed across generations, resulting from the abuses, cultural suppression, and family disruption caused by residential schools.

Kyé7e

A Secwepemctsin word meaning “grandmother,” reflecting the cultural role of transmitting language, teachings, and intergenerational knowledge.

Métis

A distinct Indigenous people of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry with their own language, culture, and nationhood.

Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI)

The Catholic religious order that administered many residential schools in Canada, including St. Joseph’s Mission, and whose members were implicated in widespread abuses.

Powwow

A gathering that brings Indigenous communities together for dancing, singing, ceremony, and the celebration of cultural identity and resilience.

Reconciliation

An ongoing process of acknowledging historical harms, repairing relationships, and addressing systemic inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Residential School Survivor

A person who attended an Indian Residential School and lived through the experience, despite many children dying in or after these institutions.

Secwepemc (Secwépemc)

A First Nation whose traditional territory covers the Interior of British Columbia and whose people maintain a distinct language and cultural traditions. This is the First Nation featured in Sugarcane.

Sixties Scoop

A period from the 1960s through the 1980s when thousands of Indigenous children were removed from their families by child welfare agencies and placed in non-Indigenous homes.

Status Indian

A legal classification under the Indian Act defining who is recognized by the federal government as having certain rights and entitlements tied to First Nations identity.

Sugarcane

The title of the film, taken from the colloquial name for the Sugarcane Reserve where the story unfolds.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

A national commission created to document the history and impacts of residential schools and to issue Calls to Action for reconciliation.

Pre-Screening Discussion

We recommend sharing the 'For students and teachers' and 'Terminology' sections of the guide with students before screening the film. We also recommend advising students that the film contains accounts of sexual, physical and psychological abuse that may be triggering and reminding them of what health supports are available to them.

- What do you already know about the residential school system in Canada, and how do you think that schools, media, or government narratives have shaped that knowledge?
- When did you first hear about Indian Residential Schools?
- What was the intent of these schools?
- Why do you think this history wasn't documented or taught?
- Who gets to write history? Whose perspectives are included and why?
- What do you not know that you want to know about this history?

Post-Screening Discussion

We recommend giving students a brief break after the screening to allow them a few minutes to process.

Personal Impact

- What is one moment of the film that resonated with you and why?
- What surprised you? Is there anything that you thought before that you think about differently now?
- What character did you most connect with and why?
- What are the different ways people coped with their pain?
- What was your biggest takeaway?
- What was one image that stuck with you and why?
- What questions or emotions are you still sitting with now that the film has ended?
- What is the role of hope in the film? Did you experience any?

Narrative & Storytelling

- What did you notice about the way the film tells the story?
- How should history be written and who should write it?
- What is truth? How do we know that something is true? Are there different kinds of truth (factual, emotional, spiritual)?
- How did the film challenge you to rethink your own assumptions about Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples?
- The film shows both trauma and resilience—how did you see these two forces interacting in the community's response?
- How did the filmmakers use storytelling, imagery, or pacing to convey the gravity of the investigation?
- What was a surprising image you noticed in the film, and what do you think it was communicating?
- One of the directors of the film is an Indigenous Canadian and the other is a non-Indigenous Canadian. What role do you think the perspectives of the filmmakers played in the film? How did their identities shape the storytelling?

Accountability

- What should justice look like? How would the film's participants imagine justice? How might it look different for Ed than it does for Charlene?
- How did the film complicate or deepen your understanding of what "truth and reconciliation" means? How are those things different, and how do they relate to each other?
- Is reconciliation possible? What does it look like?
- What did Charlene and Whitney's relationship demonstrate?
- How did you feel about Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's response?
- Is what happened at Indian Residential Schools a genocide?
- What did the film reveal about institutional responsibility—government, church, police—and how those systems responded to evidence?
- Who is responsible for what happened at the residential schools?
- Are apologies enough? Do they help?
- How do legal settlements, apologies, or institutional investigations address—or fail to address—the deeper emotional and cultural impacts passed through generations?
- What do you think the Catholic Church should do?
- What do you think the Government of Canada should do?
- What are examples of denial in the film?
- Why do you think people still deny what happened at residential schools? How can we address denial?
- What should we do? What is our role? Why should we care?

Faith

- What is the role of faith in the film?
- How did the film show spiritual resilience, and where did you see individuals or families drawing strength from cultural teachings or ancestral connections?
- How do you think survivors and communities navigate the difference between faith as a personal, meaningful practice and the actions of church institutions that caused harm?
- What did you make of Rick's relationship to the Catholic Church?
- What did you think the Oblate Priest's response to Rick in the Vatican?
- What did you think of the Pope's response?
- Did the film challenge any assumptions you had about the relationship between Indigenous spirituality and Christianity—either historically or today?
- How might faith-based organizations contribute to accountability, truth-telling, or reparative actions, and what would meaningful participation look like?
- What questions does the film raise about forgiveness, whether it is possible, and who has the right to offer or withhold it?

Intergenerational Trauma

- How did *Sugarcane* illustrate the ways trauma from residential schools continues to affect children, grandchildren, and entire communities today?
- Which moments in the film showed how trauma can be passed down not just through stories, but through behaviours, family dynamics, or community experiences?
- What did Julian and Ed's relationship tell you about intergenerational trauma? Were there any other examples of it in the film?
- What is the role of silence in the film? What does it tell you?
- How do you think the loss of language, culture, and connection to family contributed to long-term impacts across generations?
- What do you think the impacts of residential schools are today?
- What did the film suggest about the difference between individual trauma and collective, community-wide trauma?
- In *Sugarcane*, what forms of resilience or strength did you notice that also get passed down through generations alongside pain?
- How does intergenerational trauma shape relationships—with self, with family, with land, and with culture?
- What responsibilities does society have to understand the ongoing effects of trauma rather than viewing residential schools as “in the past”?
- How did the film portray the role of truth-telling—within families or public spaces—as a step toward breaking cycles of harm?
- What challenges arise when younger generations try to learn about or confront traumatic histories that elders may find painful to speak about?



VI. Action

Why should this matter to me?

The history shown in *Sugarcane* is not just a story about the past—it continues to shape the present. The impacts of residential schools are still felt in Indigenous families and communities today through loss of language, culture, land, health, and trust in institutions. Understanding this history helps us recognize how systems of inequality were created and why they persist. It encourages us to question the narratives we've inherited, to listen with care to those whose voices were suppressed, and to acknowledge the responsibilities we share in building a more truthful and equitable society. Even if you are not directly connected to this history, the film invites you to consider how colonial policies have influenced the country you live in, the privileges you may benefit from, and the relationships we all hold—with land, culture, and community.

What can I do?

For younger students:

- You can start by learning more about the history shown in *Sugarcane* and listening to the voices of survivors and Indigenous communities. Pay attention to whose stories get told—and whose have been ignored—and ask respectful questions when you want to understand more.
- If you hear misinformation or stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, speak up or share accurate information.
- Get to know the Indigenous nations whose land your school or community is on, and explore their culture, history, and languages through books, videos, events, or community resources.
- Support Indigenous creators, businesses, and organizations whenever you can.
- Most importantly, approach this history with empathy: treat the stories you hear with care, honour the people who lived through these experiences, and think about how your choices—big or small—can help create a more respectful and honest relationship with Indigenous peoples today.

For older students:

- Keep learning about the history of residential schools and the ongoing impacts on Indigenous communities.
- Listen to survivors' stories with respect, recognizing that sharing these experiences can be emotionally difficult.
- Seek out Indigenous-led sources—books, films, organizations, artists, and scholars—and center their voices in your understanding.
- Get to know more about the land you live on and learn about the First Nations, Inuit, or Métis communities connected to it.
- Challenge misinformation and denial, especially when you hear claims that minimize or dismiss the harms of residential schools.
- Reflect on your own assumptions and consider how colonial history shapes present-day systems, institutions, and relationships.
- Support Indigenous initiatives—such as language revitalization, cultural events, community programs, and local businesses.
- Advocate for respectful dialogue in classrooms, workplaces, and community spaces.
- Engage with policy and public conversations, whether by voting, attending community forums, or supporting organizations working toward justice and reconciliation.
- Approach all conversations with humility, recognizing that learning about this history is ongoing and requires openness, care, and accountability.



VI. Action

The story told in *Sugarcane* is part of a much larger history—one that continues to shape families, communities, and this country. *Sugarcane* reminds us that the truths of the residential school system are not distant history but living realities carried by survivors, families, and communities today. The stories shared in the film—and the conversations that follow—ask us to sit with complexity, to listen with care, and to recognize how these histories continue to shape the present. As you leave this guide, we invite you to keep asking questions, keep listening to survivors and their families and keep seeking out the perspectives of Indigenous communities. Understanding this history is the beginning of a deeper responsibility: to help build a future rooted in respect, accountability, and relationships that honour the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples.

Thank you for sharing *Sugarcane* with your classroom or community.