

# Attendance at Indian Residential Schools in British Columbia, 1890-1920

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By 1890, the majority of socially concerned government and church officials in Canada had concluded that education would be "the primary vehicle in the civilization and advancement of the Indian Race."<sup>1</sup> To the chagrin of such officials, however, the day schools which operated in many of British Columbia's Indian villages proved unable to secure regular attendance or appreciably alter the cultural patterns of their pupils. It seemed that a new and different schooling system — one equipped to exercise much more control over the lives of students — offered the only remaining hope of expeditiously assimilating Indians. Thus, between 1890 and 1920, government and churches undertook jointly to introduce a system of residential schools in British Columbia.<sup>2</sup>

Those who created the residential schools regarded the Indian as "a blank sheet of paper . . . to be written upon with European culture."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps because the assumptions of these white administrators so thoroughly colour all the existing documentary records, most subsequent historical discussion also rests on the unquestioned premise that Indians were passive or culturally impotent during this period. Whether interpreting educational programs as assisting or as victimizing Indians,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Canada, Department of the Interior, *Report of the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31 December 1876* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1877), p. 6. Henceforth, reports of the Department (or Branch) of Indian Affairs will be abbreviated *IA*, and will be cited by the year in which they conclude.

<sup>2</sup> Although the Department of Indian Affairs differentiated between "industrial" and "boarding" schools, and did not officially adopt the adjective "residential" until the 1920s, this paper will use the terms "boarding" and "residential" interchangeably to indicate any school where Indian children were housed in dormitories.

<sup>3</sup> E. Palmer Patterson II, *The Canadian Indian: A History Since 1500* (Don Mills: Collier MacMillan, 1972), p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> H. J. Vallery argues that once Indians recognized "the futility" of resistance, "education was used very extensively to assist [them to] change their method of living." H. J. Vallery, "A History of Indian Education in Canada" (M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1942), pp. 104, 121, and *passim*. For a portrait of Indians as helpless victims, see Robert Levine and Freda Cooper, "The Suppression of B.C. Languages: Filling in the Gaps in the Documentary Record," *Sound Heritage IV* (1976): 43-75.

Canadian scholars have almost all portrayed "white subjects" deciding the fate of "red objects."<sup>5</sup> But by concentrating on the policies of white educators most writers have failed to point out that Indian objectives and patterns of life were also vital in determining the scope and final impact of boarding school attendance.<sup>6</sup> A balanced history of the schools will describe and explain not just the policies of white educators but also the reactions and contributions of Indians. Only then will a complete and clear picture begin to emerge.

When carefully scrutinized, existing records reveal a good deal about how Indians made attendance decisions. Examining the nature and rationale of Indian attendance decisions is important because it clarifies one of the most concerted efforts to promote acculturation that white Canadians have ever undertaken. By showing how the social and economic patterns of a supposedly "sick and demoralized minority"<sup>7</sup> blunted, deflected or reshaped that assimilative drive, it suggests some of the limitations of any program of social control.

All but one of the twenty-one residential schools which ever operated in British Columbia were set up before 1920. Although the Department of Indian Affairs would have liked all Indian children to attend these schools, such an objective was well beyond reach. In 1901 the average daily attendance in boarding schools was only 17.6 percent of children aged 6 to 15 (N=608/3,445); the figure was still only 22.3 percent by 1920 (N=955/4,284).<sup>8</sup> While the aggregate number that attended the schools depended on the rate of turnover, there is evidence that a considerable proportion of young Indians — probably a majority — never entered a boarding school.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See James W. St. G. Walker, "The Indian in Canadian Historical Writing," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1971): 29.

<sup>6</sup> The only exception is Jacqueline Gresko, "White 'Rites' and Indian 'Rites': Indian Education and Native Responses in the West, 1870-1910," in *Western Canada Past and Present*, ed. A. W. Rasporich (Calgary: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), pp. 163-81.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia: vol. 1: The Impact of the White Man* (Victoria: Provincial Museum, 1964), p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> *IA*, 1901, pp. 38-51, 158-67; *IA*, 1920, pp. 34, 62-67. Since there were pupils in the schools younger than 6 and older than 15, these figures actually overstate the attendance of the given age group.

<sup>9</sup> Of natives living on British Columbia reserves in 1961, over 61 percent of those born in or before 1896 had no schooling whatsoever; approximately one in three of those born between 1897 and 1916 had been to neither day nor residential school. W. T. Stanbury, "The Education Gap: Urban Indians in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 19 (Autumn 1973), p. 27. Since day schools continued to be the preponderant form of native education during this period, it is thus probably fair to assume that only a minority of Indian children ever went to residential school.

Indians had an important role in selecting the minority of children who attended residential school. Normally, parents or guardians had the power to decide which children, if any, were enrolled.<sup>10</sup> Heads of families were supposed to sign written contracts if they chose to give schools possession of their children. Cases of involuntary enrollment undoubtedly occurred, but they were scattered and usually unauthorized.<sup>11</sup>

Principals attempting to fill their schools had to observe the Indian family's right to refuse enrollment. Joseph Hall, principal of Coqualeetza, at Sardis, tried without success to recruit pupils on Vancouver Island in January 1897. Parents were evidently quite aware of their rights and not about to be rushed. "Indians," Hall noted, "do not come to a decision at once in matters of this kind."<sup>12</sup>

Indian decisions were shaped by a multitude of considerations. Some natives, recalling that white men had imported alcohol and disease, imposed land settlements, and prohibited the potlatch, kept their children at home out of fear that the new schools would prove "an additional snare to the poor Indian."<sup>13</sup> Parents who retained aboriginal religious beliefs were often afraid that education would separate their children from them after death.<sup>14</sup> Still others were reluctant to send their young to boarding schools because the traditional Indian education, based on everyday observation and imitation of family and friends, would be interrupted even more thoroughly than it was by day schools.

In contrast, Indians who had reason to wish for social change or "advancement" might look with favour on the education of their children. Members of one band in the Fraser River Agency were particularly interested in education because they wanted "to see all their people put on a level with their white neighbours."<sup>15</sup> The first residential school pupils sometimes did experience an exhilarating enhancement of their social status. A minister in Masset recorded that one Haida boy who returned from Metlakatla for holidays "walks about here quite the centre of an admiring crowd."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Before 1920, residential schools could not legally enroll children by force. *IA*, 1920, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> For examples of compulsory enrollment, see *IA*, 1911, p. 495; and Fred Thornberg, Correspondence, MSS, PABC.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Hall to E. Robson, 14 January 1897, MS, PABC.

<sup>13</sup> *IA*, 1891, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> *IA*, 1897, p. xxvi.

<sup>15</sup> *IA*, 1898, p. 227.

<sup>16</sup> *IA*, 1892, p. 259.

Natives who had converted to Christian beliefs usually found that their new religions prescribed the approach they should take to residential schools. When influenza struck natives in the Stuart Lake area in about 1917, parents who had ignored the priest's injunction to send their children to a nearby boarding school construed the disease as divine retribution for that disobedience.<sup>17</sup> But, as Agent Frank Devlin reported, differences over questions of Christian doctrine could prevent enrollment:

Many of those who are not attending school are most anxious to go, but there is not accommodation for them. Their parents are very particular about sending their children to any school conducted by a religious denomination other than that to which they themselves belong.<sup>18</sup>

In deciding about enrollment, Indians took health conditions into consideration. Because of their precarious demographic situation, natives were especially anxious that their young live in the best available environment. Many were uneasy about entrusting their children to unknown, possibly harmful surroundings. Margaret Butcher, a teacher in the Kitimat Home, described the way any sickness in the school affected native attitudes towards it:

The Indians are so illogical, they do not consider the number of children who are brought through delicacy and sickness to strength and fitness, they only look at and count the children who are sick and 'are killed by the Home.'<sup>19</sup>

Principals were well aware that illness or death could have a disastrous impact on future enrollment. G. Donckele, principal at Kuper Island between 1890 and 1906, felt a sense of relief after he sent one sick girl home: "If her malady would have proven fatal at the School, there would have been great excitement amongst the Indians."<sup>20</sup>

Although educators often found it difficult to recruit because Indians feared the schools were unhealthy, the reverse was occasionally true as well: the particularly good health records of individual schools might encourage parents to enroll children. Ebenezer Robson reported from Coqualeetza in 1895 that, due to the concerned efforts of his teachers, "the health of those intrusted to their care has been such, when contrasted

<sup>17</sup> "Memoirs and diary, Indian School at Ft. St. James, later Fraser Lake: 'Lejac Indian School,' 1916-1922, Fr. Joseph Allard" (henceforth abbreviated as Fraser Lake School Diary), OR, reel 712.

<sup>18</sup> *IA*, 1896, p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Butcher, Correspondence, 1919, MSS, PABC.

<sup>20</sup> G. Donckele to W. Robertson, 25 October 1900, MS, DIAN.

with the children outside, as to constitute a strong reason for attendance at school, in the minds of parents."<sup>21</sup>

Being "passionately fond"<sup>22</sup> of their young, most native parents hesitated to make the emotional sacrifices enrollment involved. Alfred Hall, principal of the Alert Bay Girls' Home, described the struggle of one man who finally agreed to enroll his daughter: "You cannot think how sorrowful he looked after he had yielded her to our care — surely it was like cutting off a right hand."<sup>23</sup>

There were also economic considerations which parents took into account when deciding whether to send their children to boarding school. In 1910 Duncan Campbell Scott, Superintendent of Indian Education, lamented the peculiarly difficult situation which recruiters faced in British Columbia. Indians there, he wrote, had little incentive to seek new knowledge or trades because

the advent of white population, which in the west caused the complete disappearance of the buffalo, did not occasion any serious change in their source of food-supply. . . . They easily adapt themselves to the demands made upon them as labourers and general helpers.<sup>24</sup>

Agent William Halliday confirmed Scott's observation, noting of the Nimpkish Band that many parents "look at it from the standpoint that, as they were able to get along without education, their children can also."<sup>25</sup> But not all Indians felt they could afford to do without education. The French Catholics who ran the Kootenay School recorded that the natives in the area eventually welcomed agricultural instruction because "tous comprennent que le gibier disparaît . . . [et qu']ils seront obligés de vivre du produit de leurs fermes."<sup>26</sup>

However they assessed its future return, parents were well aware that education could exact immediate cost. There was an abundance of work which older children were able to do: sending them to school meant economic sacrifice. When John R. Scott tried to recruit pupils for the Metlakatla School in 1889, he discovered that the important role played by school-age boys in the economy of the Indian family precluded their

<sup>21</sup> IA, 1895, p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> IA, 1911, p. 236; Froben Epper, "Christie Indian Industrial School," in *British Columbia Orphan's Friend* [Historical Number, PABC] (December 1913), p. 175.

<sup>23</sup> Alfred Hall to Church Missionary Society, 3 September 1895, CMSA, reel 49.

<sup>24</sup> IA, 1910, p. 327.

<sup>25</sup> IA, 1907, p. 235.

<sup>26</sup> "Codex historicus and visit, St. Eugene's Mission, Cranbrook, 1895," OR, reel 712.

prompt enrollment: "A few [parents] said they would like to send their boys to this school at the end of the fishing season; but while the fishing lasted they were very useful, and could not well be spared."<sup>27</sup> To the south, on the lower mainland, "they all — including men, women, boys and girls — obtained employment and good wages at the different canning establishments."<sup>28</sup> Most often, the men and larger boys handled the boats and nets while the women and children worked in the canneries. Apparently the children began working at a very early age. James Sewid, a Kwakiutl, recalls that he was already a crewman on a seiner when he was 11.<sup>29</sup>

The ages at which children were enrolled in residential schools may be an important indicator of the way Indians selected pupils. Table 1 is a frequency distribution of the ages at admission of pupils in five British Columbia residential schools.<sup>30</sup> The pupils entering Coqualeetza ranged from as young as 3 to as old as 24. The modal age of entry was 10. The median was 11: an equal number of children entered under the age of 11 and over the age of 11. The median was 10 at Kuper Island, Lytton/Yale and Kamloops.

Since children of 10 or 11 were probably beginning to undertake significant roles in the family economy, the fact that half were this age or older when enrolled suggests that parents were not using the schools exclusively as free babysitting for the unproductive members of their families. The precise degree to which children of 10 or 11 were capable of contributing to their families is, of course, problematic. But whatever

<sup>27</sup> *IA*, 1889, p. 120.

<sup>28</sup> *IA*, 1890, p. 128.

<sup>29</sup> James P. Spradley, *Guests Never Leave Hungry: The Autobiography of James Sewid, A Kwakiutl Indian* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1972), p. 60.

<sup>30</sup> The samples include the 489 pupils entering the Methodist Coqualeetza School (Sardis) between March 1888 and 24 October 1911; the 96 pupils entering the Roman Catholic Kuper Island School between 7 August 1897 and 7 April 1906; 88 female pupils entering the Anglican All Hallows Girls' School (Yale) and Anglican St. George's Industrial School (Lytton) between 1910 and 1922; 154 male pupils entering St. George's Industrial School between 7 July 1911 and 1922 (All Hallows and St. George's amalgamated in 1918); and the 24 pupils entering the Roman Catholic Kamloops Industrial School between 19 May 1890 and 21 July 1890. *Sources*: Coqualeetza Industrial Institute, Register of Admissions and Discharges, March 1888 - 24 October 1911 (henceforth abbreviated as Coqualeetza Register), MS, UCA; Kuper Island Industrial School, Records of Admissions, 7 August 1897 - 7 April 1906, MSS, DIAN; All Hallows Girls' School, Register of Admissions, 1910-[1918] (henceforth abbreviated as All Hallows Admissions Register), MS, SGIS; St. George's Industrial School, Register of Admissions, 7 July 1911-1922 (henceforth abbreviated as St. George's Admissions Register), MS, SGIS; *IA*, 1890, pp. 126-27.

TABLE 1  
*Ages at Admission*

<i>Age</i>	<i>Number of Pupils</i>			
	<i>Coqualeetza</i>	<i>Kuper Island</i>	<i>Lytton/Yale</i>	<i>Kamloops</i>
3	8		2	
4	9			
5	21	1		
6	33	3	5	
7	44	9	21	2
8	32	12	29	2
9	40	10	27	5
10	47	33	34	3
11	39	9	18	3
12	43	6	25	7
13	46	3	24	1
14	35	1	34	
15	37	1	11	
16	33	1	5	
17	9			
18	9			1
Over 18	4			
Not Known		7	7	
Total	489	96	242	24
TOTAL KNOWN	489	89	235	24

the exact age at which the contributions children made began to exceed the cost of their maintenance, it is clear that enrollment was exacting economic sacrifice from a number of the parents of the older children.

On the other hand, that half of the children entering were under 10 or 11 indicates that there was at least an equal number of parents who were profiting economically by having the schools support their dependents. Whether financial considerations were in fact responsible for the enrollment of the very young children probably depended to a considerable extent on the economic situation of the individual family or band. While parents on the west coast of Vancouver Island were able to make "generous donations of fish and venison" to one school "without thought

of compensation," those at Lytton and Yale objected to school policies which required them to supply their children's clothing.<sup>31</sup>

Many of the children sent to residential schools were orphans. Of the 489 pupils attending Coqualeetza between 1888 and 1911, complete information is available for 438. Of these, 198, or 45 percent, had lost one or both parents: 82 had a living father but no mother; 86 had a mother but were fatherless; 30 were without either parent. The records of the Kuper Island School contain pertinent data on 171 children enrolling between 1890 and 1906. Eighty-five — almost 50 percent — came from families in which one or both parents had died. Fifty had only a mother; 20 had only a father; 15 were without either parent. The admissions registers of All Hallows School, at Yale, and St. George's School, at Lytton, do not contain complete information regarding parents, but they do indicate that the parents of many pupils were dead, and that several couples were separated or unmarried.<sup>32</sup>

There is no question that it was the death of their parents that produced the enrollment of many Indian children. In 1899, the principal at Kuper Island claimed he was being deluged with applications, and explained:

Through disasters, which, a few years ago befell a considerable number of Indians engaged in the sealing industry, many children have been left orphans and their guardians would . . . be glad to have them placed in the school.<sup>33</sup>

When a former pupil sent her daughter to All Hallows, she wrote the principal: "I sent my little girl to you because [*sic*] I am dying."<sup>34</sup> Marriage breakdown also prompted applications. Tommy Piel decided to enroll his two nieces at Kuper Island; one was "the daughter of his sister Mary who has lately been sent away by her husband."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *IA*, 1903, p. 413; British Columbia, *Report of the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia*, 4 vols. (Victoria: Acme Press, 1916), 2:477; *All Hallows in the West* [School Publication, AA] VI (Michaelmas 1906): 538.

<sup>32</sup> Coqualeetza Register, MS, UCA; Kuper Island Industrial School, Records of Admissions, ca. 1890 - 7 April 1906, MSS, DIAN (Details regarding the first thirty-two students admitted to the school are illegible); St. George's Admissions Register, MS, SGIS; All Hallows Admissions Register, MS, SGIS.

<sup>33</sup> G. Donckele to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 24 February 1899, MS, DIAN.

<sup>34</sup> *IA*, 1901, p. 416.

<sup>35</sup> G. Donckele to W. Robertson, 2 November 1905, MS, DIAN.

The death of one parent did not, however, always encourage enrollment. An older child could be an economic asset to a widowed parent by performing tasks previously done by the deceased parent. G. Donckele discharged one older boy from Kuper Island with the observation: "On account of his mother having died lately he will have to help his father at home."<sup>36</sup> It was very young children who were sometimes a greater economic burden than a single parent could support. Adelaide Purser sent her three children under the age of 12 to the Kuper Island School in 1905 because her husband's recent death meant that she would have to go out to work, and would no longer have the time or financial resources to give them the care and attention they required.<sup>37</sup>

In some areas, parents were more willing to enroll one sex than the other. Agent Halliday wrote from Alert Bay, for example, that many Kwakiutl feared education would teach girls not to participate in the economically and culturally vital potlatch.<sup>38</sup> On balance, however, boys and girls attended the schools in approximately equal numbers: in 1894, 165 boys and 187 girls; in 1910, 425 boys and 411 girls; in 1920, 547 boys and 568 girls. These figures do not necessarily reflect the situation in individual institutions; most schools were mixed, but not in equal numbers.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the major objection of parents to the residential schools was the great separation of family members that attendance usually entailed. The resistance of Indians to the fragmentation of their families eventually forced educators to change the way they built the schools. In the early 1890s, most educators thought familial associations ought to be kept to an absolute minimum by constructing boarding schools some distance from reserves.<sup>40</sup> But the reluctance of Indians to use faraway schools led the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, James Smart, to conclude in 1899 that the institutions should be built on reserves, "where the parents can see the children from time to time, and thus greatly mitigate the sense of separation."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 19 December 1900, MS, DIAN.

<sup>37</sup> G. Donckele to Adelaide Purser, 11 March 1905; Kuper Island Industrial School, Records of Admissions, 7 August 1897 - 7 April 1906, MSS, DIAN.

<sup>38</sup> *IA*, 1911, pp. 382-83.

<sup>39</sup> *IA*, 1894, pp. 258-59; *IA*, 1910, pp. 362-65; *IA*, 1920, pp. 64-67.

<sup>40</sup> Jacqueline J. Kennedy, "Qu'Appelle Industrial School: White 'Rites' for the Indians of the Old North-West" (M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1970), pp. 72-73; *IA*, 1891, p. xiii.

<sup>41</sup> *IA*, 1899, p. xxxii.

Parents who did send children to residential school may have tried to minimize the isolation of family members by enrolling more than one child. Of the 489 pupils attending Coqualeetza between 1888 and 1911, at least 199 had a brother or sister who also attended — almost always concurrently. Fifty-one families sent two children; nineteen sent three; six sent four; two sent five; and one sent six. A minimum of 46 percent ( $N=45/96$ ) of pupils entering the Kuper Island School between 1897 and 1906 had siblings in attendance.<sup>42</sup> Family ties were maintained, if in attenuated form, within the walls of the institutions.

Parents and friends insisted on seeing students and inspecting living conditions in the schools. The directors of the Fraser Lake School at first encouraged visits, but their patience wore thin when huge crowds of Indians invaded the school every Sunday. Not only parents, but also many young Indians came, “bringing camp ideas,” and upsetting discipline. To the frustration of the school’s officials, all attempts to limit the visits to parents, or to certain hours, soon failed.<sup>43</sup>

Indians also minimized the separation of family members by forcing most residential schools to grant summer holidays. In the early 1890s, the Department of Indian Affairs urged schools not to let pupils go home during the summer.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, it soon became evident to most principals, and to the Department, that the only practical course was to allow pupils a few weeks to be with their parents during the summer. In his first year of operation at Kuper Island, G. Donckele took his pupils boating and picnicking instead of letting them go home. But they “would be whole days pining around the buildings for their parents, and the consequence was that a good many got sick.” Moreover, parents had such great need of their older children as helpers during the fishing season that “unless extreme measures be taken, the Parents will forcibly take away their children.” Out of necessity, the Department began allowing a five to six week break during the fishing season.<sup>45</sup> Originally designed to overcome the irregularity and disruption caused by children’s work, residential schools were obliged to adapt, in some measure, to the rhythms of the Indian family.

<sup>42</sup> Coqualeetza Register, MS, UCA; Kuper Island Industrial School, Records of Admissions, 7 August 1897 - 7 April 1906, MSS, DIAN.

<sup>43</sup> Fraser Lake School Diary, 12 February 1922 - 17 June 1923, OR, reel 712.

<sup>44</sup> G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 11 December 1893, MS, DIAN.

<sup>45</sup> G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 11 December 1893; G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 7 May 1895; G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 8 June 1894; G. C. Van Gothen to A. W. Vowell, 6 July 1896, MSS, DIAN.

The terms of the contracts which parents signed at the time of their children's enrollment forbade children to leave, temporarily or permanently, without the authorization of the Department. But a considerable number of Indians "only laughed at the idea."<sup>46</sup> While there are, unfortunately, no reliable truancy statistics, impressionistic evidence indicates that most residential schools were plagued, at least periodically, by truancy. In 1911, George Ditcham was fired as principal of the Lytton School because he was unable to keep the children at school. In his final annual report, Ditcham bitterly described the situation he was leaving:

There are only five small boys at school — some finished and others absconded . . . one followed the other like cattle, and as the expense was too great for constables to bring them back and hold them at school, they are still away.

Even after Ditcham was replaced, pupils ran away in droves, sometimes staying at the school only a few days between escapes.<sup>47</sup>

Children ran from the schools for a number of reasons. Some disliked the manual labour and religious instruction which figured so prominently in the curriculum, had economic responsibilities to their parents, or were overcome by homesickness. Others left to take part in traditional activities the schools were interrupting. For example, many boys deserted Kuper Island each year during January and February; according to the principal, the annual winter dances were the "primary cause."<sup>48</sup> Runaways were often fleeing from the new discipline of their time and movement; from the rigid system of rules and bells which obliged them to be always at designated places at designated times. In addition, the severe punishments, including whipping, which boarding schools employed to uphold their stern regimes were much harsher than those to which the Indian children were accustomed.

Early schools lacked the financial and logistical resources to compel the return of truants. Donckele of Kuper Island contrasted the situation in British Columbia with that on the prairies, where

by keeping a detachment of Mounted Police, as I have witnessed at the St. Joseph's Industrial School, they can prevent [pupils] from running away,

<sup>46</sup> Epper, p. 175; G. Donckele to W. Lomas, 2 December 1895, MS, DIAN.

<sup>47</sup> *IA*, 1911, pp. 492, 576; A. R. Hives, "The New England Company" (Typescript, AA, [1958]), pp. 29-30; St. George's Admissions Register, MS, SGIS.

<sup>48</sup> G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 8 February 1897; G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 16 February 1897, MSS, DIAN.

but here we have no means whatsoever of compelling [Indians] to send their children to school and to make them stay for a certain length of time.<sup>49</sup>

The records of the schools during their first years of operation show that children frequently remained away without official permission, and that school authorities simply discharged pupils who did not return voluntarily.<sup>50</sup>

By about the turn of the century, however, some schools were beginning to assert their legal authority over truants. In February 1896 Donckele acknowledged receipt at Kuper Island of a Department "circular" which instructed him to compel the attendance of pupils, according to the terms of their signed contracts. To prevent the Indians from thinking that "the law governing Indian schools is but a mere letter," Donckele went to considerable length in succeeding years to enforce it.<sup>51</sup> The Lytton School, with its even more serious truancy problems, made extensive use of constables to bring errant students back to school.<sup>52</sup>

Educators wanted to keep native children in the boarding schools for up to ten years. In the early 1890s, willing parents signed a document committing their children for three to five years. After 1895, all contracts stipulated that the school could keep the child "until such time as the Department considers it advisable to grant his or her discharge."<sup>53</sup> Poor health conditions continued to end many school careers prematurely, but the introduction of medical examinations and the enforcement of contracts gradually lengthened the average stay of pupils. Table 2 is a frequency distribution of the lengths of enrollment of pupils admitted to Coqualeetza between 1888 and 1902; and discharged from Kuper Island between 1890 and 1906.<sup>54</sup> The median length of enrollment at Coqua-

<sup>49</sup> G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 24 January 1894, MS, DIAN.

<sup>50</sup> Coqualeetza Register, MS, UCA; Kuper Island Industrial School, Record of Discharges to 30 June 1906, MS, DIAN.

<sup>51</sup> G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 5 February 1896; G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 7 July 1900; G. Donckele to W. Robertson, 12 July 1900; G. Donckele to F. Devlin, 31 July 1900; G. Donckele to F. Devlin, 8 August 1900; G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 31 December 1900; G. Donckele to A. W. Vowell, 15 March 1901, MSS, DIAN.

<sup>52</sup> St. George's Admissions Register, MS, SGIS.

<sup>53</sup> G. C. Van Gothen to A. W. Vowell, 14 August 1896; G. Donckele to W. Robertson, 7 January 1901, MSS, DIAN; *IA*, 1906, p. 257.

<sup>54</sup> The Coqualeetza sample is limited to the 305 pupils entering the school before 1902, since data on discharges for pupils entering after that date is spotty, and probably biased in favour of those who left earliest. The Kuper Island sample may be unavoidably weighted towards those who left earliest, as the only legible record regarding length of stay groups all pupils discharged from the school between 1890

TABLE 2  
*Lengths of Enrollment*

<i>Years on Roll</i>	<i>Number of Pupils</i>	
	<i>Coqualeetza</i>	<i>Kuper Island</i>
Less than 1	66	16
1 - 2	38	29
2 - 3	45	15
3 - 4	42	13
4 - 5	35	13
5 - 6	14	17
6 - 7	12	14
7 - 8	4	16
8 - 9	9	4
9 - 10	9	5
10 - 11	10	
11 - 12	6	
12 - 13	3	
More than 13	2	
Not Known	10	
Total	305	142
TOTAL KNOWN	295	142

leetza was two years, ten months; at Kuper Island, it was three years, seven months. At Coqualeetza, 23.4 percent of the students were enrolled five years or more, while 39.4 percent of those at Kuper Island officially stayed that long.

Enrollment did not mean that the child was necessarily in attendance for the entire period. Children were sometimes left on the roll for months or even years after they had ceased to attend because school officials mistakenly expected them to return. Many other pupils were absent for extended periods due to illness or truancy. Between 1890 and 1920 the number of students actually in British Columbia's residential schools on

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and 30 June 1906. Hopefully any distortion caused by examining pupils lumped together because they were discharged will be minimized by the fact that the record extends over a fairly long period. *Sources:* Coqualeetza Register, MS, UCA; Kuper Island Industrial School, Record of Discharges to 30 June 1906, MS, DIAN.

the average day ranged from 80 to 95 percent of the number on their rolls.<sup>55</sup>

Children who attended residential schools before 1920 do not appear to have been seriously alienated from their families or native patterns of life when they returned home. J. H. Van Den Brink states that young Haida who went back to the Queen Charlottes "after long absences" found themselves "permanently estranged from the life there."<sup>56</sup> It is clear, however, that only a minority were away from their families for exceptionally long periods, and that most retained at least some contact with reserve life while enrolled in school. Thus, although parents occasionally claimed that pupils returned home "disobedient and conceited,"<sup>57</sup> it is evident that most of the students resumed family relationships with little difficulty, and pursued the same occupations they would have had they never gone away to school. Examination of Coqualeetza's school register shows that those who were totally or partially orphaned went to live with the relatives they did have.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, the 1911 report of the Ahousaht School indicates that boys returned to parents if they had them, to uncles if they did not; and then went fishing and sealing.<sup>59</sup> In some places, a few ex-pupils attempted to enter the trades they had learned, or worked primarily for wages. "Still," noted the principal at Kamloops, "they always remain in contact with their own people."<sup>60</sup>

By the turn of the century, most officials agreed with Deputy Superintendent General James Smart, who stated that the ex-pupils "to all intents and purposes remain Indians, with all their deepest interests, affections and ambitions centred in their reserves."<sup>61</sup> The original hope — that after spending their formative years in residential schools, Indian children would become "amalgamated with the general community"<sup>62</sup> — was not being realized. Consequently, educators adjusted their stated objectives to correspond more closely to their actual accomplishments. In 1910, the Superintendent of Indian Education, Duncan Campbell

<sup>55</sup> *IA*, School Statements, 1890-1920.

<sup>56</sup> J. H. Van Den Brink, *The Haida Indians: Cultural Change mainly between 1876-1970* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 82.

<sup>57</sup> British Columbia, *Royal Commission on Indian Affairs*, 3:561.

<sup>58</sup> Coqualeetza Register, MS, UCA.

<sup>59</sup> *IA*, 1911, pp. 592-93.

<sup>60</sup> *IA*, 1910, p. 500.

<sup>61</sup> *IA*, 1901, p. xxix.

<sup>62</sup> *IA*, 1887, pp. lxxix-lxxx.

Scott, announced that residential schools aimed “to fit the Indian for civilized life in his own environment.”<sup>63</sup>

This alteration of goal constituted acknowledgement of the capacity of Indian rhythms to influence the nature and outcome of white acculturative efforts. Educators originally conceived boarding schools as powerful instruments of social change, over whose operation and results they would exercise complete control. But a whole range of factors — not just the efforts of the churches or of the Department of Indian Affairs — determined the educational experiences and social destinies of Indian children. Native patterns of life conditioned thousands of everyday decisions concerning details of attendance. Parents decided, out of a combination of emotional, economic and cultural considerations, whether to send children to school, which children to send, at what age to let them go, how many to enroll, and, to a limited extent, how much contact between family and child existed during attendance. Children reacted to the schools according to their traditional rhythms, sometimes refusing the new discipline with such persistence that officials were driven to seek new means of coercion. And, after the conclusion of their education, most pupils resumed interrupted native patterns of life, instead of trying to join the white community.

Unfortunately, writers have portrayed Indians as essentially passive during this period — as a decimated and bewildered minority, fit only to be “pitied, converted, and administered.”<sup>64</sup> The perspective of the last one hundred years reinforces the misconception: Indians, apparently “losers” in the cultural “battle” which transpired, let slip control of their own destiny, and watched powerlessly as they were helped or victimized by schemes of social manipulation. In fact, as Robert Berkhofer has noted, “both groups behaved according to their own cultural systems.”<sup>65</sup> Examining how Indians made attendance decisions reveals much, not only about their cultural assumptions, but also about social problems and changes they were experiencing. Indian society was undergoing transformation. That does not mean Indians were quiescent or reacted without reference to important cultural rhythms. Any relationship is a mutual and perpetually changing phenomenon; to examine the contributions of

<sup>63</sup> *IA*, 1910, p. 273.

<sup>64</sup> Duff, p. 45.

<sup>65</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. ix.

only one of its participants is to see not half a picture, but a gravely distorted image.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- AA: Anglican Church Archives, University of British Columbia.
- CMSA: Church Missionary Society Archives, microfilm, University of British Columbia Library.
- DIAN: Department of Indian Affairs District Office Archives, Nanaimo, British Columbia.
- IA: Annual Report of the Department [Branch] of Indian Affairs.
- OR: Records of the Oblate Missions of British Columbia, microfilm, University of British Columbia Library.
- PABC: Provincial Archives of British Columbia.
- SGIS: St. George's Industrial School, Lytton, British Columbia.
- UCA: United Church Archives, University of British Columbia.