In class

The government’s educational expectations for residential schools were not high. In 1889, Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed wrote that residential school children should not be educated to “earn their bread by brain-work rather than by manual labour.” Nine years later Deputy Indian Affairs Minister James Smart said that to “To educate children above the possibilities of their station, and create a distaste for what is certain to be their environment in life, would be not only a waste of money but doing them an injury instead of conferring a benefit upon them.” It was not until after World War II that the schools offered high school courses.

While some industrial schools provided training in printing and shoemaking, for the most part the vocational training in the schools was limited to farming and associated skills such as blacksmithing and carpentry in the case of boys and homemaking for girls. Teachers and tools were often in short supply. As late as 1950, only 22 percent of Aboriginal children went beyond Grade 6 while the average for the non-Aboriginal population was 37 percent.

Many former students have specific memories of teachers who encouraged or inspired them and some schools, such as Grandin College in the Northwest Territories, developed positive reputations. But for many children education was an alien and frustrating experience that had separated them from their parents’ world and left them poorly prepared to make their way in the dominant culture.

“The thought of leaving all my friends behind, girls with whom I had spent eight years, eight unsuccessful year of having the Indian educated out of us, left me with a great feeling of loss.”
– Jane Willis