The Influence of Education on the Cultural Identity of Japanese Canadian Students in British Columbia from 1940-1950

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Education influenced the cultural identity and assimilation of Japanese Canadian students in B.C from 1940-1950. This essay will examine the education that Japanese Canadians students received in the pre-war era, in internment camps during WWII, and in the post- war era in British Columbia. There will be a brief history given of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia and an overview of why the Japanese community was interned in 1942. This essay will then discuss Japanese Canadians in the public school system in the pre-war era. The role that the Vancouver Language School played will be looked at in terms of education and creating ethnic identity. Furthering that thinking, the connection between first generation Japanese Canadians and the second generation Japanese Canadians that attended the language school will be discussed. Second, this essay will look at the education that was established in the internment camps during WWII. Focus will be put on the role of the BC Security Commission in the establishment of education for the interned Japanese community, the emergency school that was set up in the clearing station at Hastings Park, and the schools that were organized in the internment camps. Primary sources will be looked at to supplement and support this essay. These sources include BCSC Annual Reports on Education from 1942 and 1945, a 1945 Camp Supervisor Report from the Tashme internment camp, and an article from The New Canadian. Lastly, this essay will discuss education for Japanese Canadians in the post-war era. This section will examine how the internment influenced citizenship identity and cultural identity for second generation Japanese Canadians, and also discuss the re-opening of the Vancouver Language School .

**Overview and History of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia**

Prior to WWII, British Columbia had a history of anti-Asian discrimination. Japanese people began to immigrate to British Columbia near turn of the twentieth century and the predominantly white population greeted them with discrimination and violence. The province denied Asians the right to vote, attempted to limit immigration, and there was an anti-Asian riot in Vancouver in 1907[[1]](#footnote-1). At the beginning of the Second World War, people of Japanese descent, or Nisei (second generation), were unable to participate in the draft because this would give them the right to register to vote. In 1941 Japanese troops attacked Pearl Harbor, infuriating the white, Canadian society. Following this attack there were fears that anyone of Japanese descent was a spy and disloyal to Canada. The CPR fired all Japanese workers, Japanese fishermen were ordered to remain in port, and numerous fishing boats were seized[[2]](#footnote-2). A following attack on Hong Kong which imprisoned and killed many Canadian troops, lead British Columbia to exile anyone of Japanese racial origin or descent. Whether they were immigrants or Canadian born, the Japanese people were labeled as ‘enemy aliens’. A 100 mile strip along the coast of B.C was deemed a protected area by the federal government and anyone of Japanese ethnicity was forcibly relocated to internment camps found in the BC interior. After the war ended, the government exiled the Japanese community further and gave told them they had to relocate past the Rocky Mountains or return to Japan[[3]](#footnote-3). It is important to keep in mind that many of the individuals were born in Canada and had never before been to Japan.

**Japanese Canadians in the Public School System in the Pre-War Era**

The students of Japanese descent that were attending public school in the 1940’s were typically second generation, or *Nisei*. These students grew up trying to balance two worlds: the Japanese world of their parents, and the Canadian world that they were growing up in. In an interview, a Nisei woman discloses that she enjoyed public school because it was a place where you grew up away from being Japanese and were able to meet all sorts of people[[4]](#footnote-4). Due to the fact that the Japanese were a minority, many students had white friends and did not consider themselves Japanese[[5]](#footnote-5). The cultural boundaries that deciphered their “Japaneseness” were markers such as the food eaten at home, the language spoken at home, and their appearance. It can be assumed that all students in the public school system were taught the same curriculum, thus the Japanese students were receiving the same education as their white peers while attending public schools. The students had such a strong reputation as intelligent and hard-working students in the B.C public school system that it caused fears of “yellow intelligence”[[6]](#footnote-6).

Many Japanese students, however, attended the Vancouver Japanese Language School after their regular school day was over. Until the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Language School was the largest school of its kind on the Pacific Coast of North America[[7]](#footnote-7). The language school helped first generation, or *Issei*, to pass on culture and cultural identity to their children. The curriculum taught at the school was prepared by the Japanese Ministry of Education and placed emphasis on moral and patriotic education[[8]](#footnote-8). The aim of Japanese parents sending their children to such a school was to create good, Japanese citizens. Having Nisei children learn the language and cultural values would solidify ties to their parents and the Japanese community.

Trying to balance these two cultural worlds created a crisis of identity for the Nisei students. For example, in public school classrooms teachers did not make an attempt to pronounce Japanese names, yet in the language school the students were often reprimanded for writing their names in English[[9]](#footnote-9).

**Education in the Internment Camps of the B.C Interior**

Role of the B.C Security Commission

The B.C Security Commission was put in charge of the evacuation of the Japanese community from B.C’s coast. The Commission was responsible for providing food, clothing, and shelter for the exiled Japanese peoples; however they did not claim responsibility for the education of the displaced children right away. This is due to the fact that the education of all children in Canada was a provincial mandate[[10]](#footnote-10). However, because the evacuation was federally mandated, the province refused all responsibility for the education of the evacuee children. The BCSC then stepped in and assumed the responsibility for the education. An article entitled “It’s Up To Us”, written in the newspaper “The New Canadian” on October 10, 1942, stated “The provincial government has declined to contribute in any way to this evident need [education for school aged children in evacuation settlements]. The Security Commission, working with severe financial limitations, will therefore provide correspondence courses, essential text-books, and a few paid workers”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The B.C Security Commission and the Hastings Park Clearing Station

Their first instance of aiding in education was in the Hastings Park clearing station. In April (1942), a Mr. Grant McNeil, acting on behalf of the BCSC, negotiated with the B.C Provincial Education Department to get correspondence courses for the high school students that were in the holding station[[12]](#footnote-12). The BCSC then appointed a Mr. W.S McRae, a teacher in the city of Vancouver, to be in charge of the education at the Hastings Park clearing station in May[[13]](#footnote-13). The only Japanese teacher with Normal school training and a teaching certificate was Hide Hyodo, who soon became McRae’s assistant[[14]](#footnote-14). She would continue on to be an integral part of the education for Japanese students during WWII. Together, McRae and Hyodo held makeshift classrooms in one of the buildings found on site and ran classes from 9:00am-11:30am[[15]](#footnote-15), for both elementary and secondary students. Other staff consisted of Japanese student teachers, high school or university students, selected by Hyodo. Although supplies were limited, the school gained desks and text books from the abandoned Japanese Language School, the Vancouver Public Library, and the BCSC[[16]](#footnote-16). Some students still had their own textbooks and those were utilized as well. In terms of student population, the numbers were constantly fluctuating as new pupils entered Hastings Park and others were sent off to their permanent internment camps.

While the school at the Hastings Park clearing station was functional, the BCSC had to figure out a system for education in the internment camps. In assuming this responsibility, the BCSC had two conditions: the first that the families who had voluntarily migrated from the coast had to find their own arrangements for their children and the second was that they would only provide elementary education in the internment camps. This helped to make the BCSC’s job easier. Another factor that lessened the responsibility of the BCSC is that the curriculum had already been established. The students had already been in the public school system prior to evacuation, and the provincial curriculum had continued to be followed in the Hastings Park school. Any highs school education that would take place in the internment camps was taken over by the United Church.

Establishment of the Schools

After staying in the Hastings Park clearing station, families were dispersed across the B.C interior into internment camps. Majority of these camps were located in old mining districts where houses were still habitable and there was little opposition to the Japanese people. The districts were New Denver, Roseberry, Kaslo, Sandon, Slocan (Bay Farm, Popoff, Lemon Creek) and Greenwood. Two Annual Reports on Education from the BCSC will be examined here. The first is from 1942, when the camps were first opened. The report is set up in paragraphs, each summarizing the progress of the education program at the internment camps. The report states that in November 1942, Tashme had 629 pupils in the elementary school. It states that plans are being made to convert “D building” into classrooms as well as a community hall. Due to the accommodations, the BCSC believed that they would not be able to run classes full time. At that time, the teaching staff was still being organized[[17]](#footnote-17). According to this report, similar situations were found in the Kaslo (212 pupils), Sandon (185 pupils), Rosebery (72 pupils), New Denver (212 pupils) and Slocan locations (1016 pupils): meetings were being held to explain the education program, space was being acquired, and teachers were being organized[[18]](#footnote-18). The majority of the students in these locations were expected to be able to attend a full day of classes. The BCSC was concerned that the white community would be jealous if better school conditions were given to the Japanese students than to nearby white students, however none of the classrooms were ideal[[19]](#footnote-19). For the school at Greenwood, the report states that the Japanese Catholic Mission had fully organized the elementary school and was holding classes in the old fire hall[[20]](#footnote-20). This school had a student body of 286 pupils. The report states that the Mission was also looking after an additional kindergarten class and high school class. The Mission was looking to improve upon the building so that students may attend a full day. Furthermore, the United Church had organized an additional school in the Greenwood camp where they had about 60 students[[21]](#footnote-21). As stated in “The New Canadian” in May 1942, “These schools have achieved remarkable success working with the barest of improvised facilities”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The second Annual Education Report is from 1945. This report shows the progress that has been made in the education program throughout the years of internment. The report from 1945 delivers the statistics from the education programs in a chart that is divided up into grades, camp locations, and totals of the student populations. The report also briefly outlines the subjects being taught. This report demonstrates that by 1945 these schools were being run as their own school system, as shown by the breakdown of grades, attendance, and visits to the school by the BCSC[[23]](#footnote-23). Furthermore, a Camp Supervisor Report of Tashme from May 1945 states that apart from the elementary and high school classes, there was also a manual training and domestic science school that was run in connection to the educational facilities[[24]](#footnote-24).

The Experience of Teachers in the Internment Camps

Due to the success of using Japanese student teachers in the Hastings Park clearing station school, the BCSC continued to count on the co-operation of the Japanese to become teachers. Marie Katsuno was one of those teachers. In an interview, she described the situation as “becoming instant teachers”[[25]](#footnote-25). She explains that at first there was a lack of materials, but once the BCSC recognized the classes as regular schools, there was vast improvement in supplies[[26]](#footnote-26).

The BCSC recognized the need for teacher training and held summer school at the New Denver location for the teachers. The situation with the teachers was that many of them were young high school students who had not completed their education themselves. Thus they may not have been too far ahead of the students they were teaching. However what the BCSC chose to focus on at the summer school was that teachers in the internment camps were meant to be teaching the young students to be future citizens of Canada[[27]](#footnote-27). It was decided that all work given at the summer school should have practical application to the classrooms in the internment camps[[28]](#footnote-28). The student teachers were “improved” to be more proper Canadian citizens while at the summer school so that they could more easily pass those values on to their students. The curriculum that was to be taught was highly patriotic in subjects such as social studies, history, and geography[[29]](#footnote-29). There were concerns that having Japanese teachers would not give the students an adequately “Canadian” education, however without the help of the provincial government, as stated earlier, there was no way for the BCSC to hire enough white educators. It should also be noted that the majority of the teachers in the internment camps were female. This is due to the fact that the majority of men were sent to road camps separate from their families, and that the men were needed for manual labour around the camps.

**Education for Japanese Canadians in the Post War Era**

The education that Japanese students received while living in the internment camps aided their assimilation into Canadian society after the war was over. Language played a major role in this. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the *Nisei* struggled in the pre-war era to balance their Japanese world with the Canadian world that they were growing up in. The *Nisei* students that attended regular public school also had to attend the Vancouver Japanese Language School after the regular school day had finished. This was mainly due to their first generation parents, or *Issei*, wanting their children to remain connected to their culture and the Japanese community on the coast. However the *Nisei* were fluent in English and more attuned to life in Canadian society[[30]](#footnote-30). Thus when the Japanese community was interned, English was the predominate language spoken. Teachers at the internment camp schools were instructed by the BCSC to teach lessons in English and discourage the use of Japanese[[31]](#footnote-31). Furthermore, when the BCSC was lobbying with the province to assume responsibility of education, the BCSC argued that providing education in the internment camps would be of national interest because it would help the students assimilate once the war was over[[32]](#footnote-32). The BCSC also considered the influence grades would have on transition into public schools after the war, and began to properly grade the students[[33]](#footnote-33).

In the pre-war era, Japanese- language schools were open wherever there was a large ethnic community of Japanese people[[34]](#footnote-34). Because of the evacuation of Japanese people from B.C’s coast, these ethnic communities disappeared. This large geographic dispersal broke up the strong cultural and community ties that the *Issei* had worked so hard to build. With the policy that Japanese people had to relocate past the Rocky Mountains or immigrate to Japan after the war, there was no way to reconstruct the communities that had once been built. Thus rendering the need for Japanese language schools unnecessary. This then meant that after the war, *Nisei* students could fully assimilate into Canadian society without argument. It can be argued that the internment and patriotic education that Japanese students received while in the camps made them ready and willing to participate in society as equals.

The Vancouver Japanese Language School did eventually reopen in 1952 and was seen as an attempt to rebuild ethnic identity in a less than favourable social climate. The purpose of the Japanese Language School changed, and became a place for students of various ethnic backgrounds to learn about Japanese culture[[35]](#footnote-35). The function became about sharing a culture, rather than attempting to preserve it.

**Conclusion**

The education that Japanese Canadian students received in British Columbia between 1940 and 1950 had great influence on their cultural identity and their citizenship identity. The students that were in school during the pre-war era, the internment, and the post-war era were the most susceptible to influence from their educators. Their parents, who were first generation Canadians, tried to preserve the Japanese culture, language, and community in their children by sending them to the Vancouver Japanese Language School. Educators in the internment camp schools were instructed to teach only in English, and much of the curriculum included patriotic, Canadian material. Lastly, the dispersal of the Japanese Canadians throughout Canada in the post-war era rendered the need for the Japanese Language schools unnecessary and supplemented a loss of culture. It is also important to recognize that the BCSC supported providing adequate education for the Japanese Canadian students. Even at a time of great social unrest, the BCSC didn’t leave the students with nothing.

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