



Witness Blanket



Teacher Guide

Building Empathy

Building Empathy

Survivor testimonials allows us to humanize the stories of residential schools and reverse the dehumanization that was a part of the genocide committed against Indigenous peoples by Canada. There is a need to include these stories when talking about Canada's history and the legacy of residential schools because Indigenous peoples are a part of Canada.

Students from kindergarten to grade 12 are invited to bear witness to the events of the residential school era by hearing from Survivors directly, and in doing so, honour their truths. This witnessing is an important act of reconciliation.

Before exploring the *Witness Blanket* with students, it is important to preview the contents, connect with the stories and explore your own understanding of residential schools. This is heart-work and will be difficult. Sharing your personal experiences, emotions and learning with your students will be valuable and help them feel safe to process and reflect on their own journeys of understanding.

The document *A human rights classroom culture* supports this important learning through strategies that allow students time and space to reflect, respond and internalize. [A human rights classroom culture](#) includes lessons using Indigenous pedagogies and introduces the idea of a reflection wall to display shared thoughts and reflections over time.

Goals

- Students will understand that they are on a personal journey to learn the truths about residential schools.
- Students will consider their feelings and build empathy with Survivors.

Objectives

1. Review a story from the *Witness Blanket*.
2. Make connections to the Survivors' testimonials.
3. Reflect on the story and how it makes you feel.

Scope and sequence

Experiencing stories from the *Witness Blanket* requires adequate time and space in the classroom. Using a human rights classroom approach will ensure students have opportunities to reflect on and share as they process. This heart-work will take time, so keep this in mind when planning.

This next section has been broken into five parts that explain how the website is laid out for each object or piece. This is followed by a set of lesson plans for classroom use, as an added support for teachers who would like a lesson plan to follow.

1. Previewing the *Witness Blanket*
2. Building personal connections with the pieces
3. Bearing witness, exploring the stories
4. Critical reflections
5. Moving forward

Previewing the Witness Blanket

It is important to assess the foundational knowledge of each student to establish a benchmark. One way to do that is by using a talking circle. Teachers can ask students to share what they understand about the experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada. This is also a form of evaluation for the teacher, an opportunity to gauge where you and your students are in your journey together.

Watch the [introductory video](#) together and share initial thoughts, feelings and ideas about exploring the *Witness Blanket* together.together.

Reflect on the video or the talking circle using the reflection wall.

Personal connections with the pieces

Each piece of the *Witness Blanket* tells a story. While they're all from a different place or person, the stories they tell connect with many other stories and experiences. The pieces also allow us to build empathy as we form our own connections. In this activity, students will select a story and view the related piece from the *Witness Blanket* to identify a personal connection.

Bearing witness, explore the story

The stories of the *Witness Blanket* experience are anchored by pieces from the artwork. The stories are told using text, images and videos of survivors. These stories bear witness to the truths of residential schools. Reflecting on and learning from these stories is an important part of building empathy. How you choose to explore these stories with your students will depend on their needs. It is essential to ensure students have time and space to reflect and process what they have heard, read and seen.

During this initial exploration of the *Witness Blanket*, students should explore stories with the sole purpose of understanding the truth. Critical thinking related to the stories will take place in the second phase.

Here are some preparation questions or guiding questions for reflection (applicable to both a talking circle and a reflection wall):

1. What happened at residential schools?
2. What feelings do you have about this story and what makes you feel this way?
3. What do you think about residential school Survivors?

Story text

The text of each story has been written to allow teachers to present an appropriate amount of information to varied audiences at a specific reading level. Typically, the text follows the following story arc:

- 1. First and second paragraphs**
 - a. Connect pieces to residential school experiences.
 - b. Introduce the theme and key message of the story.
Grade 4-6 reading level. Recommended for kindergarten and up.
- 2. First half**
 - a. Explores the key messages of the story and includes quotes from Survivors.
Grade 6 reading level. Recommended for grades 5-8 and up.
- 3. Full story**
 - a. Explores the theme as well as key and secondary messages fully. Includes numerous quotes from Survivors. Examines the intentions of government.
Grade 8 reading level. Recommended for grades 9-12 and up.
- 4. Final section**
 - a. Illustrates how holding on to their cultures in the face of oppression was a source of strength for Survivors.

Video Testimony

Video testimony is a powerful part of the stories. It is imperative for educators to preview the videos. Each story includes several short clips from Survivors. Students exploring the *Witness Blanket* may view these testimonials independently, but it is also valuable to watch them and reflect collectively.

Allowing younger audiences to hear from Survivors is essential and practical within a setting that allows for reflection and dialogue, such as a human rights classroom. Survivors talk about their longing for home and missing family, their sadness and frustration at smelling food they can't have, and some of their fears during their time at residential schools. Children will relate to many of these stories on a basic level.

Reflection

What more would I like to know about the residential school experience?

Evaluation

Teaching to build empathy requires that the teacher understand the students. Developing a human rights culture will allow the teacher to gather a shared vision for the classroom. Students will share their thoughts on how they work best, show their reflections on the reflection wall, and participate in discussions or talking circles. This formative assessment will shift and grow with each new learning. A rubric for evaluation has been provided as a guide. It can be used to mark moments over time, and with the [Pathways of Reconciliation](#) document.

The Witness Blanket Lessons



Each story in the *Witness Blanket* starts with a piece collected from the site of a residential school or donated by a Survivor or their family, a church or government, or a cultural organization. The objects are woven together to bear witness to the stories of Survivors.

In this set of lessons, students will make a personal connection to a piece of the *Witness Blanket*. These personal connections are the first step in students' journey of building empathy with Indigenous peoples and their experiences of residential schools.

Previewing the *Witness Blanket*

Objectives

- Students will understand that they are on a personal journey to learn the truths about residential schools.

All ages

Activate

Using a talking circle, ask students to share their understandings about the experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

- a. You may want to open the talking circle by sharing how your perceptions and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in Canada have changed over time. This will help students understand their own personal journey.

Learn and discuss

Watch the introductory video together and share initial thoughts, feelings and ideas about exploring the *Witness Blanket* together.

Reflect and share

Ask students to reflect on the following questions (questions should be adjusted to be in age-appropriate language):

- a. What do you know about Indigenous peoples?
- b. How has your knowledge of Indigenous peoples in Canada changed over time?
- c. What emotions do you associate with this understanding?

Ask students to write, draw or represent their ideas and add it to the reflection wall.

Personal connections with the pieces

The pieces that make up the *Witness Blanket* come mostly from the sites of residential schools across Canada. Each piece holds the stories of Survivors.

Objectives

- Students will build a personal connection with a piece from the *Witness Blanket*.

All ages

Activate

Gather in a circle and introduce students to a piece you have selected from the *Witness Blanket* menu item “Select a story.”

- a. If students are selecting an object independently, remind them to select a piece and not to explore the story yet.

Learn and discuss

Using a talking circle, ask students to share about a personal connection they have with the piece. The guiding questions can support this discussion.

Guiding questions

Students can consider the following questions to help build their connection:

- a. What do you know about this story or piece?
- b. Are you familiar with it?
- c. What does it make you think of?
- d. How does it make you feel? Are your feelings positive or negative?

Reflect and share

Ask students to write, draw or represent their connection to the piece on a reflection wall shape and add it to the reflection wall.

Bearing witness, exploring the stories

Part 1: Connecting to text

Objectives

- Students will contrast their personal connections to the pieces with the experiences of Survivors.
- Students will build empathy through understanding the loss Indigenous people experienced as a result of residential schools.

Early Years (Kindergarten-Grade 4)

Activate

Gather in a circle and discuss:

**What kind of story are we going to hear?
Who went to residential school?**

Learn and discuss

Read the first 2 paragraphs of the story together.

Discuss with students how the piece relates to residential schools.

Add details from the story as needed to help students deepen their understanding.

Using a talking circle, discuss the following:

**What happened in the story?
How does this story make you feel?**

Reflect and share

Ask students to reflect on the differences between their personal connections to the piece and how it was experienced at residential schools.

Ask students to write, draw or represent these difference on a reflection wall shape and add it to the reflection wall.

Middle Years (Grades 5-8)

Activate

Create small groups based on the piece students felt the strongest connection to.

Read the first section of the story together.

Learn and discuss

Ask students to reflect on the memories, emotions and experiences they had with the piece and consider how those memories, emotions and experiences would differ compared to those of residential school survivors.

Ask groups to create a Venn diagram that compares their connections to the piece. Include experiences, memories and emotions.

Reflect and Share

1. Using a talking circle, ask students to reflect on the differences between their personal connections to the piece and how it was experienced at residential schools.
2. Ask students to write, draw or represent these differences on a reflection wall shape and add it to the reflection wall.

Senior years (Grades 9-12)

Activate

Ask students to explore the whole story of the piece that they felt the strongest connection to.

Learn and Discuss

There are numerous opportunities at this point to connect to a variety of outcomes depending on the context of the course students are enrolled in.

At minimum, students should use the steps outlined in the middle years section, where they compare and contrast their experiences and connection with an object with those of residential school Survivors.

Reflect and Share

1. Using a talking circle, ask students to share their thoughts and experiences about how their memories, emotions and experiences differ compared to those of residential school Survivors.

Ask student to write, draw or represent these difference on a reflection wall shape and add it to the reflection wall.

Part 2: Connecting to survivor’s testimonials

Objectives:

- Students will hear directly from Survivors.
- Student will develop and share a value statement about the intent of residential schools.

Early Years (Kindergarten-Grade 4)

Activate

Pre-select one appropriate Survivor video and watch it together.

Learn and Discuss

Using a talking circle, ask students to share how they felt when hearing from a Survivor, and ask them to identify emotions Survivors might have felt before, during and after their time in residential schools.

Discuss what was lost as a result of attending residential schools.

Reflect and Share

Using a talking circle, ask students to make a value judgment about the residential school system (e.g., it was wrong, it was harmful, it was purposely harmful).

Ask students to write, draw or represent their thoughts on a reflection wall shape and add it to the reflection wall.

Middle and Senior Years (Grades 5-12)

Activate

Discuss the difference in hearing a story directly from the source versus hearing it second hand or reading about it.

Learn and discuss

As a class, watch all the video testimonials that are related to the piece or pieces explored in the previous lesson.

After each video, use a talking circle to share students’ emotions and identify the emotions survivors might have felt before, during and after their time in residential schools.

Ensure students can reflect on the stories they have heard. Consider watching the videos over several days.

For students in senior years, teachers may want to ask students to examine video testimonials in greater depth.

Reflect and Share

Independently reflect and respond to the following questions:

- a. What was lost because of the residential school system?
- b. How does the loss of these ways of life affect Indigenous people today?

Using a talking circle, ask students to make a value judgment about the residential school system. (e.g. It was wrong because _____. It was intentional because _____.)

Reflections on this section

Now that we are witnesses to these stories, what do we do next? What responsibilities do we have?
