



Witness Blanket



Teacher Guide

Overview

“When teaching about residential schools, we know it is going to be hard. It is going to be uncomfortable. It is heart-work, for ourselves and for our students.”

– Marjorie Dumont, *Xpey’ Elementary*, Vancouver School District, BC

Acknowledgements



Entwistle Family Foundation

Witness Blanket Teacher Advisory Circle

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The Witness Blanket Teacher Guide



This guide was developed with teachers across Canada as a framework for teaching about residential schools using the *Witness Blanket*. It includes lessons, activities and approaches designed to help students and teachers build empathy through witnessing and take the next steps on their own pathways of reconciliation.

Learning about residential schools and the experiences of Survivors is essential for reconciling how we teach about Canada. It is a way we can humanize Survivors and bring Indigenous history into the classroom, particularly the stories of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island after Canadian confederation. When students face Survivors' truths, they can better understand the genocide perpetrated by Canada against Indigenous peoples. They can also begin to challenge the systems in place that make it more difficult for Indigenous peoples to thrive.

Pedagogical approach

Teaching about residential schools and the genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada can be uncomfortable for both teachers and students. Taking a learning posture and being authentic about your own feelings and emotions is essential. This resource positions teachers as guides moving alongside students as they learn, empathize and act together.

The *Witness Blanket* centres on the experiences of Survivors and allows users to understand their experiences directly. Many Survivors do not share their experiences, even with their families. The history of Indigenous peoples is not a part of provincial or territorial curricula, outside of chapters on explorers and treaties. We cannot expect that everyone already knows about residential schools, including students of Indigenous ancestry.

The nature of the topic makes it essential for students to have space to listen, reflect and share. To achieve this, teachers must take the necessary time to build a culture where students feel safe.

A note on emotions in the classroom

You and your students may feel sadness, outrage, anger learning about residential schools. This is good: these emotions are essential as we build empathy and personal connections to lead to taking action.

A human rights classroom culture

This resource uses a human rights classroom model, understanding that the classroom is a place where students and teachers listen to and learn from each other. Characteristics of a human rights classroom have strong correlations with Indigenous pedagogies.

“The foundations of Indigenous pedagogy are respect, mutual learning between student and teacher, and positionality or recognizing that everyone has different experiences that brought them to this learning (Kaminski, 2008).”

Establishing a human rights classroom culture at the outset will allow for discussions to take place where students can share their feelings in a safe way. Once that culture is established in a classroom, students and teachers will engage in a three-phase approach:

Building empathy

Building empathy will help students understand the loss that was experienced by Survivors and their families. Students will explore the experiences of Survivors through the lens of basic needs, such as food, shelter, love and security. Students will hear testimonies and explore pieces of the *Witness Blanket* to understand how the loss of these basic needs due to the residential school system continues to impact Indigenous people.

Connecting with Indigenous communities

Classes are encouraged to connect with Indigenous people in their community. This could mean speaking with an Elder or participating in ceremony and other forms of local Indigenous culture. The goal is that each student can further build their empathy and understand how Indigenous communities and ways of knowing continue to survive.

Pathways of Reconciliation

Having understood the harms caused by residential schools, and connected with Survivors and local Indigenous cultures, students will be encouraged to examine how they can take action for reconciliation. They will be asked to develop a plan to take the next steps on their journey, either personally or collectively as a class.

Trauma-informed approach

Centering the needs of the students and their lived experience by acknowledging their stories and connections to the stories of Survivors is important for developing empathy. It also requires establishing boundaries, including challenging stereotypes when they are raised and establishing protocols for discussion. The teacher’s role is to guide discussions, to circulate among students, to promote reflection and critical thinking, and as needed, to ask questions such as “What do you mean by that?”.

You can also send a letter to let families know that students will be talking about residential schools. They will appreciate knowing that the conversation is upcoming and may also want to explore the *Witness Blanket* website independently.