by Joe Ferguson

ORANGE SHIRT DAY ACTIVITIES

Jean Moir

ORIGINS OF ORANGE SHIRT DAY

The website for Orange Shirt Day is *www.orangeshirtday.org/*

The site contains lots of background information, gives suggestions for ways to celebrate the day and provides suggested activities. For example, if you select "Phyllis' Story" in the drop down, you can read Phyllis' own description of what happened to her as a child. It is reprinted here for simplicity:

Phyllis (Jack) Webstad's story in her own words...

I went to the Mission for one school year in 1973/1974. I had just turned 6 years old. I lived with my grandmother on the Dog Creek reserve. We never had very much money, but somehow my granny managed to buy me a new outfit to go to the Mission school. I remember going to Robinson's store and picking out a shiny orange shirt. It had string laced up in front and was so bright and exciting – just like I felt to be going to school!

When I got to the Mission, they stripped me, and took away my clothes, including the orange shirt! I never wore it again. I didn't understand why they wouldn't give it back to me, it was mine! The color orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn't matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing. All of us little children were crying, and no one cared.

I was 13.8 years old and in grade 8 when my son Jeremy was born. Because my grandmother and mother both attended residential school for 10 years each, I never knew what a parent was

supposed to be like. With the help of my aunt, Agness Jack, I was able to raise my son and have him know me as his mother.

I went to a treatment centre for healing when I was 27 and have been on this healing journey since then. I finally get it, that the feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission, affected the way I lived my life for many years. Even now, when I know nothing could be further than the truth, I still sometimes feel that I don't matter. Even with all the work I've done!

I am honoured to be able to tell my story so that others may benefit and understand, and maybe other survivors will feel comfortable enough to share their stories.

Today...

Phyllis Webstad is Northern Secwpemc (Shuswap) from the Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation (Canoe Creek Indian Band). She comes from mixed Secwepemc and Irish/French heritage, was born in Dog Creek, and lives in Williams Lake, BC. Today, Phyllis is married, has one son, a step-son and four grandchildren.

She earned diplomas in Business Administration from the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology; and in Accounting from Thompson Rivers University. Phyllis received the 2017 TRU Distinguished Alumni Award for her unprecedented impact on local, provincial, national and international communities through the sharing of her orange shirt story.

Suggested Videos

Two videos are highly recommended for use with students, depending on grade level. They are also accessible through the Orange Shirt Day website. The first is excellent for grades 3 and up (Okay for grade twos later in the year) because Phyllis, the owner of the original orange shirt, shares her story in a child-friendly, easy to follow (albeit powerful) way. The background behind Phyllis changes continuously to show images of Phyllis' traditional way of life vs. residential school.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3vUqr01kAkt

The second video is just as powerful but suitable for a slightly older audience, maybe grade 6 and up:
youtube.com/watch?v=ll1pUrK29MM&feature=youtu.be

Both of these videos help us all understand how the orange shirt itself wasn't so important as what it symbolized: the cruelty of life at residential school, the attempt to strip Aboriginal children of their identity and self-worth and making them feel as if they didn't matter or have any value. Apart from the importance of learning about this history and working towards Reconciliation, the slogan "**Every Child Matters**" is highly relevant because many Aboriginal children in Canada are not treated equally even today.

Possible discussion questions:

Why was Phyllis so upset about the orange shirt? Was it just the shirt? How would you feel if your parents bought you something very special to start the school year and it was taken away from you? Would it be even worse it you were being sent away to a new and very strange school?

So, what do you think Orange Shirt Day is really all about? Allow for lots of discussion. Record responses.

Symbols are objects or items that represent or stand for something important. Some examples would be "heart" for love, "dove" for peace, etc. Have students brainstorm other symbols they are familiar with and put them up on chart paper. Next, have students talk to the person sitting next to them about what the orange shirt has become a symbol of on Orange Shirt Day? What does it really stand for? Once students have discussed with one person, ask them to move on to another person, and so on for five to ten minutes. Share ideas and record them on the projector or chart paper. Examples might include: "sadness, loss of pride, embarrassment, humiliation, cruelty, loss of identity, hurt, heartbroken, unkindness, meanness." Now ask students to narrow their ideas down to the three or four key ideas they think best describes the symbolism and highlight them. Keep the results visible during Orange Shirt Day activities. Encourage students to add to or adjust their responses as they complete Orange Shirt Day activities.

Orange Shirt Day activities and participation connect to numerous aspects of the BC curriculum, especially personal and social responsibility and social studies. The following are just one Big Idea, Curriculum Competency and Content outcome for social studies at each grade level:

Kindergarten

Big Idea: Rights, roles, and responsibilities shape our identity and help us build healthy relationships with others.
Curriculum Competency: Identify fair and unfair aspects of events, decisions, or actions in their lives and consider appropriate courses of action (ethical judgment.)
Content: rights, roles, and responsibilities of individuals and groups.

Grade One

Big Idea: Our rights, roles, and responsibilities are important for building strong communities.
Curriculum Competency: Identify fair and unfair aspects of events, decisions, or actions in their lives and consider appropriate courses of action (ethical judgment.)
Content: roles, rights, and responsibilities in the local community.

Grade Two

Big Idea: Individuals have rights and responsibilities as global citizens.
Curriculum Competency: Make value judgments about events, decisions, or actions, and suggest lessons that can be learned (ethical judgment.)
Content: rights and responsibilities of individuals regionally and globally.

Grade Three

Big Idea: Learning about indigenous peoples nurtures multicultural awareness and respect for diversity.
Curriculum Competency: Make value judgments about events, decisions, or actions, and suggest lessons that can be learned (ethical judgment.)
Content: aspects of life shared by and common to peoples and cultures.

Grade Four

Big Idea: Interactions between First Peoples and Europeans lead to conflict and cooperation, which continues to shape Canada's identity.
Curriculum Competency: Make ethical judgments about events, decisions, or actions that consider the conditions of a particular time and place (ethical judgment).
Content: the impact of colonization on First Peoples societies in British Columbia and Canada.

Grade Five

Big Idea: Canada's policies and treatment of minority peoples have negative and positive legacies.
Curriculum Competency: Make ethical judgments about events, decisions, or actions that consider the conditions of a particular time and place and assess appropriate ways to respond (ethical judgment.)
Content: past discriminatory government policies and actions, such as residential schools.

Grade Six

Big Idea: Systems of government vary in their respect for human rights and freedoms.
Curriculum Competency: Make ethical judgments about events, decisions, or actions that consider the conditions of a particular time and place and assess appropriate ways to respond (ethical judgment.)
Content: economic policies and resource management, including effects on Indigenous peoples.

Grade Seven

Big Idea: Economic specialization and trade networks can lead to conflict and cooperation between societies.
Curriculum Competency: Make ethical judgments about past events, decisions, or actions, and assess the limitations of drawing direct lessons from the past (ethical judgment.)
Content: social, political, legal, governmental, and economic systems and structures, including at least one Indigenous to the Americas.

WHOLE SCHOOL ORANGE SHIRT DAY ACTIVITIES

Regardless of which stories you study or what activities your school chooses to do, please consider having your students write a letter to Prime Minister Trudeau on the letter template provided. Blank space has been included for each student to write or draw a personal message to the Prime Minister. Teachers may want to collect the letters for their class or have each student address their own envelope to:

Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Remember: Postage to the Prime Minister is free!

At Langley Meadows Community, a whole school initiative involved making copies of the chosen stories available to staff. After reading and discussing the stories, teachers and students collaborated and created their own personally relevant responses that were displayed on very large paper "orange shirts" and put up around the school. See sample pictures. In addition, many classes created their own unique displays.

For example, one class started talking about how it would feel to be at residential school. Once students started brainstorming "feeling words," it was difficult to get them to stop. Students decided they needed to do a display of their words. To encourage collaboration and ownership, the teacher asked each student to provide at least one feeling word for the display – teacher wrote them down as they were generated and overlapping of words was avoided. Students were then put into groups of 5 or 6 to think about what the title should be for the display and what shape words should be printed on. After each group shared out, children decided the title would be, "Children Felt … at residential school".

"SAFE AND COMFY"
SCHOOLS FOR ALL

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau,

Please honour Orange Shirt Day, the survivors of residential schools, and the children who did not survive. Honour all people in Canada by ensuring the necessary steps are taken to **ensure every Aboriginal child in Canada** matters and receives a quality education in **safe and comfy schools**.

Fold sleeves under.

Fold bottom half of t-shirt underneath.

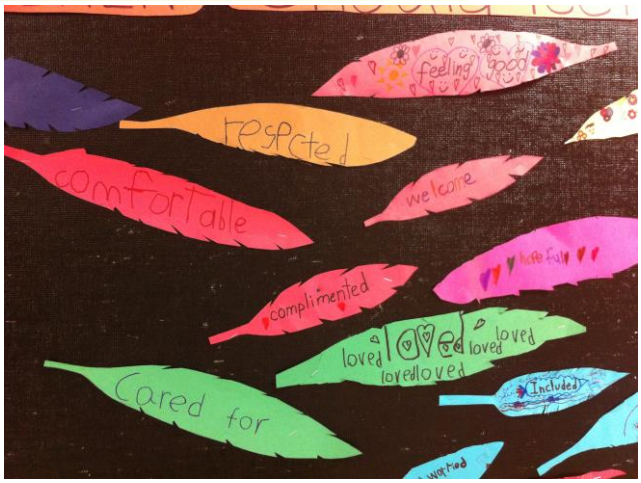
Draw, write, or decorate in the box provided.

Respectfully,

Name and Grade My School

Shannen's Dream for Safe and Comfy Schools. *School is a time for dreams, every kid deserves this* – Shannen Koostachin

The talk then turned to how children *should* feel at school – teachers cued students by asking how students felt at our school. One child soon pointed out that our new words were the opposites to those of children at residential school. Following more discussion and group work, another display was created called, “Children at School … Should Feel.”



A class down the hall saw these displays and they soon put up a display entitled, “How We Feel” after learning about residential schools.

Another teacher had her children create a display of Cinquain poems after studying *When I Was Eight.*

Other classes decorated their large orange shirts with hands, artwork and/or words.
See examples.

One more display needed to be done. What students could do to help move reconciliation forward. Students decided the display should be entitled, “To Help Reconciliation, You Can …” (see pictures)

From Langley Meadows School Blog following Orange Shirt Day.

“Our school was a sea of orange today as we learned about Residential Schools and honoured survivors. Students shared their understanding and empathy by wearing orange, reading stories and creating posters and displays that were put up throughout the school. A teacher visiting from Abbotsford commented on how impressed she was; she said she felt quite “emotional” as she walked through our school and saw the depth of knowledge and compassion shown by our students.

Understanding and acknowledging our shared history is a vital part of working towards Reconciliation. Students also generated thoughtful suggestions for helping move Reconciliation in Canada forward. We are so proud of all our Langley Meadows members!”

Grade 5 students generated our school's Orange Shirt Day announcements.

Here is our favourite:

It is time to wear orange to remember those who went to Residential School. Wear orange on Friday to remember the children whose souls are now free and flying. Also remember those who did make it and are now telling their stories. It is time to show empathy. Wear orange! Thank you.

By Keira,

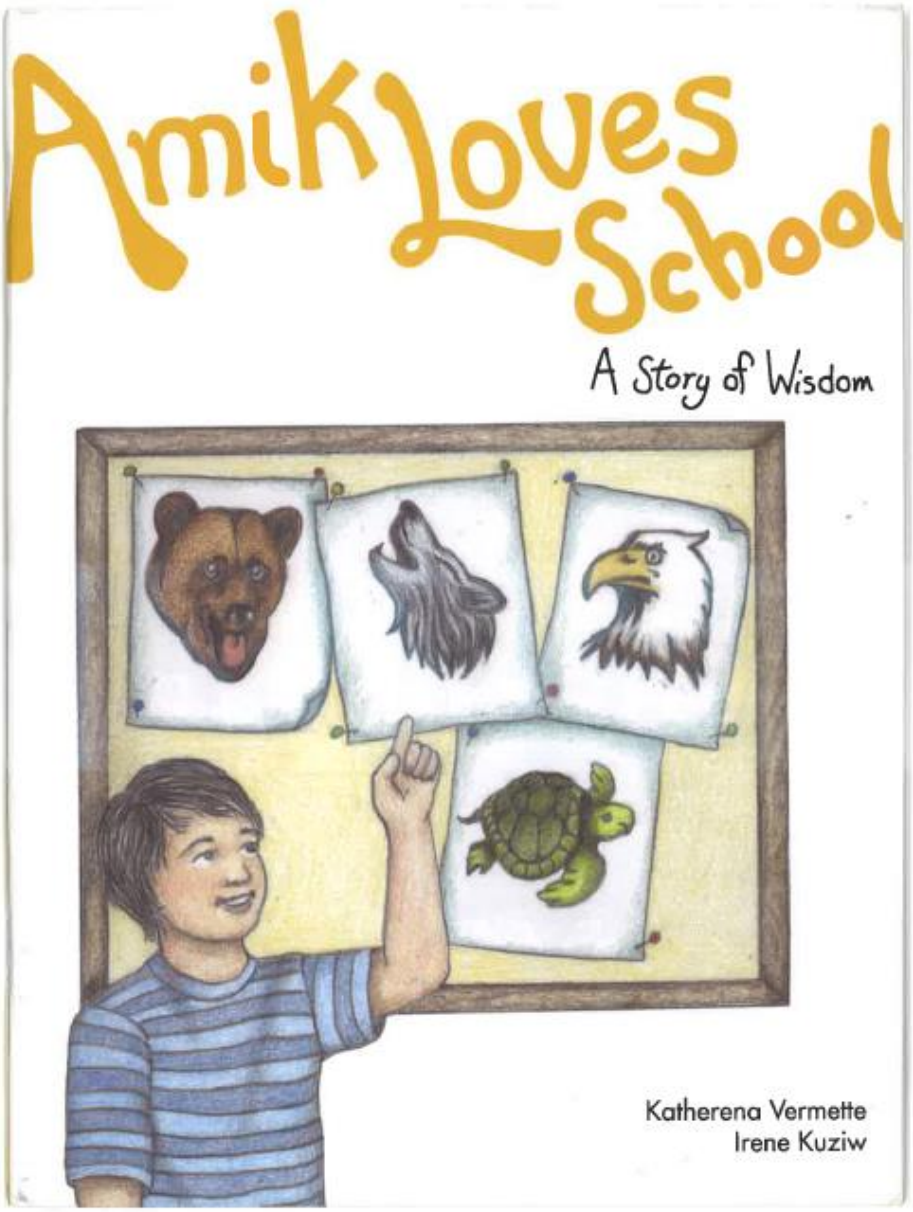
Suggested Stories

Sample Lesson Plans are provided for several stories aimed at different age and grade levels.

For Grades K to 2

Amik Loves School by Katherena Vermette

Note: This story is one of a set of six books for young children called ***Seven Teachings Stories***, available from Strong Nations Resources in Nanaimo.



This is a simple, gentle story about two Aboriginal brothers who take their grandfather to see their school. Grandfather had gone to residential school and has unhappy memories. These

children love their school and grandfather feels much better after he visits and sees that his grandsons are treated well and are learning about their Aboriginal culture.

Helpful notes for kids/teachers:

"Mooshoom" means grandfather – although the Mooshoom in the book looks very young!

"smudging" – for a good description and protocols, see:

www.sd58.bc.ca/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Smudging-Protocol2.pdf

Protocols for smudging and other cultural practices may vary from nation to nation. The above is provided as an example.

Possible Discussion Questions:

Teachers may want to record student responses on chart paper.

What are some of the things Amik loves about school? What do you love about school? Are Amik's reasons for loving school similar to your reasons for loving school? Help children make connections between Amik and their lives at school.

Mooshoom (Amik's grandfather) is glad his grandson likes school but what does Mooshoom say when Amik asks him about his teachers/school? What does Mooshoom's face look like?

Mooshoom visits Amik's school. What are some of the things Mooshoom is happy to see at Amik's school? Why do you think he likes these things? Help students make connections as appropriate – while residential schools stripped away identity, language and culture, Amik's school is actually embracing and teaching the students their language, culture, etc.

Mooshoom cries after seeing all the wonderful things at Amik's school. Are his tears of sadness or happiness? Do people sometimes cry when they are happy? Yes, especially when they are deeply moved. In this case, Mooshooom is so, so happy that his grandson is having such a better experience than he did at school.

This story has a happy ending. Discuss how we know this. Be sure to reassure children who may be worried about the idea of going away to school, if necessary.

Do students need to worry about getting sent away to school? No, that doesn't happen anymore. We are learning about our history. It is important to understand what happened in the past, so we can understand today and help us make the world a better place in the future.

Be sure children understand that we are asking students and staff to wear orange shirts to remember how unkind residential schools were to Aboriginal children. Phyllis is a lady who had her new, bright orange shirt taken away when she arrived at residential school, so orange shirts are worn as symbols of what happened. We also want to help make life fair and kind for all Aboriginal children in Canada. **Every Child Matters**, and all children should be treated equally.

Possible Art Activity for Young Children:

Have students do water colour painting on large sheets of paper – ask them to paint what they thought the residential schools might have looked like (with no pressure at all as to what to include or how to paint). When the paintings are done, ask the child to give one word to describe how he/she thinks the children felt at these schools. Teacher scribes for the child as needed. Print the word on a piece of paper and then glue it to a corner of the picture. These make a powerful display.

Decorate small or large paper orange t-shirts with students' artwork or words that express their ideas and feelings about Orange Shirt Day (see ideas in other lessons.)

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I'm
sorry
that
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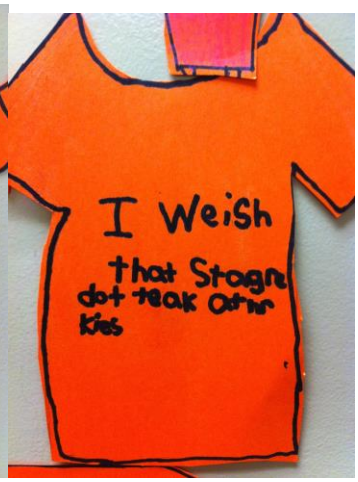
taken from
your
family.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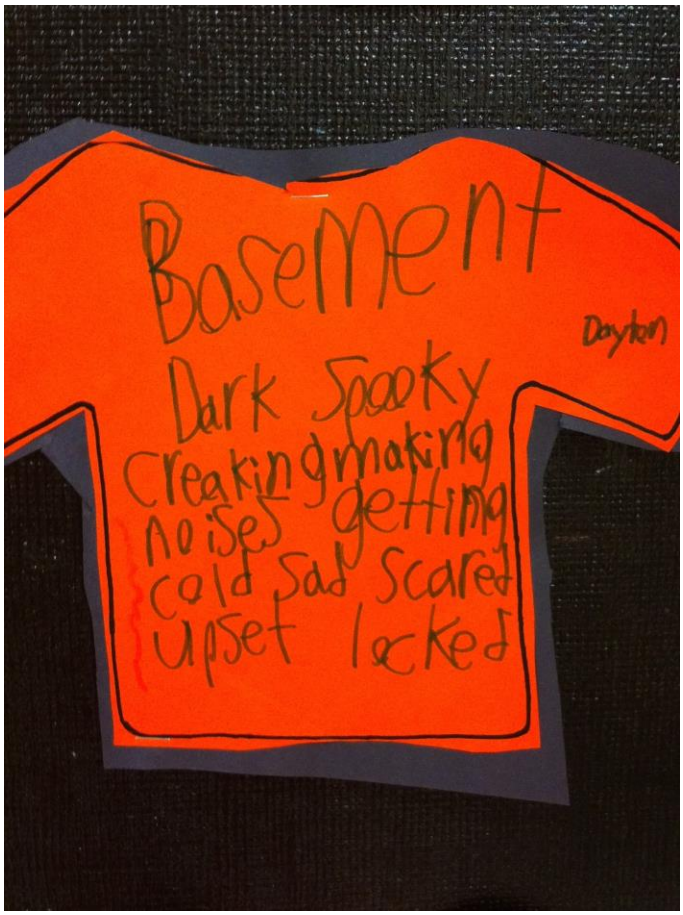
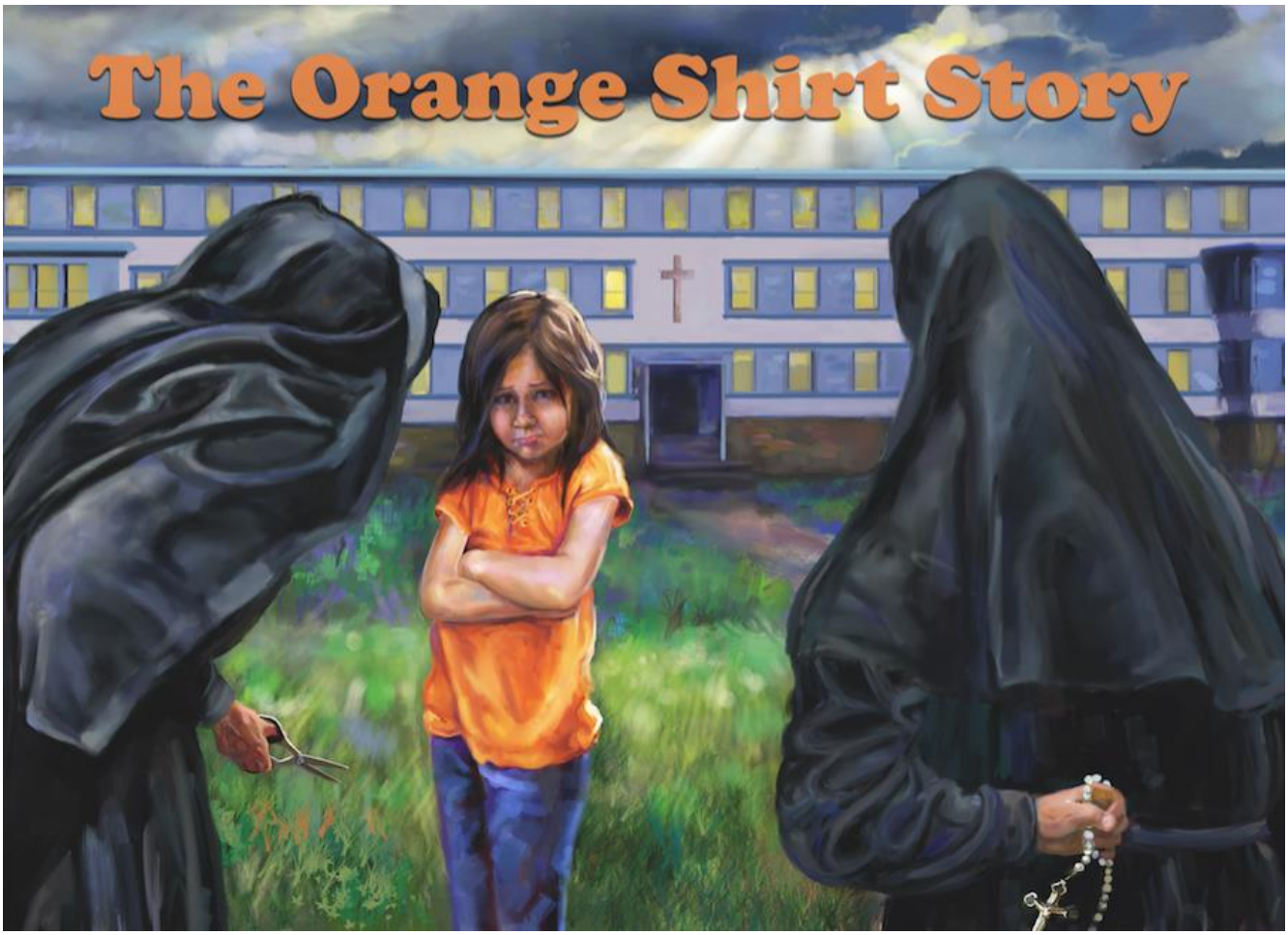

Basement
Dayton
Dark Spooky
Creaking making
noises getting
cold sad scared
upset locked

Grade 2 and Up

This story would likely be too much for kindergarten, Grade one and possibly Grade two children in September (Orange Shirt Day is at the end of September). We recommend using *You Hold Me Up* and *Amik Loves School* for younger children.

The Orange Shirt Story by Phyllis Webstad



Just released on September 18th! *The Orange Shirt Story* is Phyllis' story in her own words, as she vividly remembers it. In fact, the story reads much as if a child is relating the story to another child, which helps children relate and connect personally to her story. Ms. Webstad made an audio recording of her book and we highly recommend accessing it as it makes her story even more compelling and powerful. This story is the story behind Orange Shirt Day. It could be used instead of, or in addition to, the videos suggested above. If you are unable to get access to the audio of Phyllis reading the story, we suggest showing at least one of the videos, so children can get a sense of Ms. Webstad's personality, which is gentle, unassuming and genuine.

Discussion questions could be very similar to those provided for the "suggested videos" (see p.5). Additional discussion questions could include:

Apart from Granny, what did Phyllis miss most when she was at residential school? Relate to Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Being.
https://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/AboriginalEducation/AboriginalWaysofKnowing.pdf

Examples: Phyllis misses her close connection to the land and living in harmony with it: growing and eating vegetables, picking berries, fishing for fresh salmon. She misses being in her Granny's kitchen – Granny was a respected Elder who others came to for advice, knowledge and friendship. It was a place of comfort and caring. Have students come up with other examples from the story or make connections to other examples of Ways of Knowing and Being. Also see Phyllis' description of family traditions she continues today on the page near the back of the book called "Author's Note."

What is the overwhelming feeling Phyllis has that makes her feel unloved, disrespected and uncared for? Hint: It is where the slogan for Orange Shirt Day comes from. Phyllis feels like she "doesn't matter". Ask students to give examples from the story that cause Phyllis to feel this way and record answers. There are many examples. Ask students what this would feel like: Can they give examples of times they have felt like they did not matter? Consider a sharing circle to discuss this and maybe other discussion questions.

Phyllis' message for Orange Shirt Day is "**Every Child Matters.**" Does she mean just Aboriginal children? Why or why not? Hear responses, then refer children to the page near the back of the book where Phyllis describes Orange Shirt Day. As students will see, Phyllis wants the message to be that ALL children matter, "from every nation around the world".

During her talks, Ms. Webstad shares other information that teachers may want to discuss with their students. For example, when Phyllis leaves for school wearing her "shiny orange shirt for the first time" and says good-bye to Granny, Granny pats Phyllis on the head and says, "what loves it," which may seem unusual to readers. According to Phyllis, because her Granny and her Granny's parents attended residential school, they did not learn how to express love to a child. Another commonly asked question is, "Where was your mother?" Phyllis' mother was forced to leave the reserve when Phyllis was born. However, they are in touch now and Phyllis asked her mother to write a letter for students to read. Teachers: please ensure students respect and appreciate how incredibly generous and open Ms. Webstad has been in sharing her most difficult times and relationships so students can learn about residential schools.

Near the back of the book, Phyllis has provided an "About the Author" section, as well as important historical and cultural information. In "A Story of the Secwepemc (Shuswap) People" Phyllis outlines many important facts, beliefs and traditions of her culture. "St. Joseph's Residential School" provides general background on residential schools and allows students to examine the history of St. Joseph's Mission. Sample lesson plans for older children that review this information are provided.

Also see follow-up activities suggested elsewhere in this booklet.

On "A Story of the Secwepemc (Shuswap) People"

Have students examine the map to see how large the Secwepemc Traditional Territory is. Students may need to use the English names of locations (e.g., Merritt, Castlegar, Revelstoke, Williams Lake, Clinton, etc.) before being able to appreciate the vast area and the traditional names. Ask students what three major rivers are in this territory (Columbia, Thompson and Fraser). Teachers may wish to print copies of maps of B.C. to overlay the map in the book to examine locations more closely. Ask students to locate where they live in relation to this territory. Have they been to some of these places?

This section includes historical and geographical data; it also includes traditions and beliefs of Phyllis and her culture. Remind students that, when studying history, they must be aware of "historical perspectives." Phyllis is providing us with her personal perspective and the Aboriginal perspective of her Nation.

Have students individually or in groups read and study this section, then give their opinion on the following:

In your opinion, how do you think Phyllis and her people managed to resist and stay strong? No wrong answers. Try to support your opinion with evidence (details and examples, etc.) from this section, the story, other activities you have done etc.

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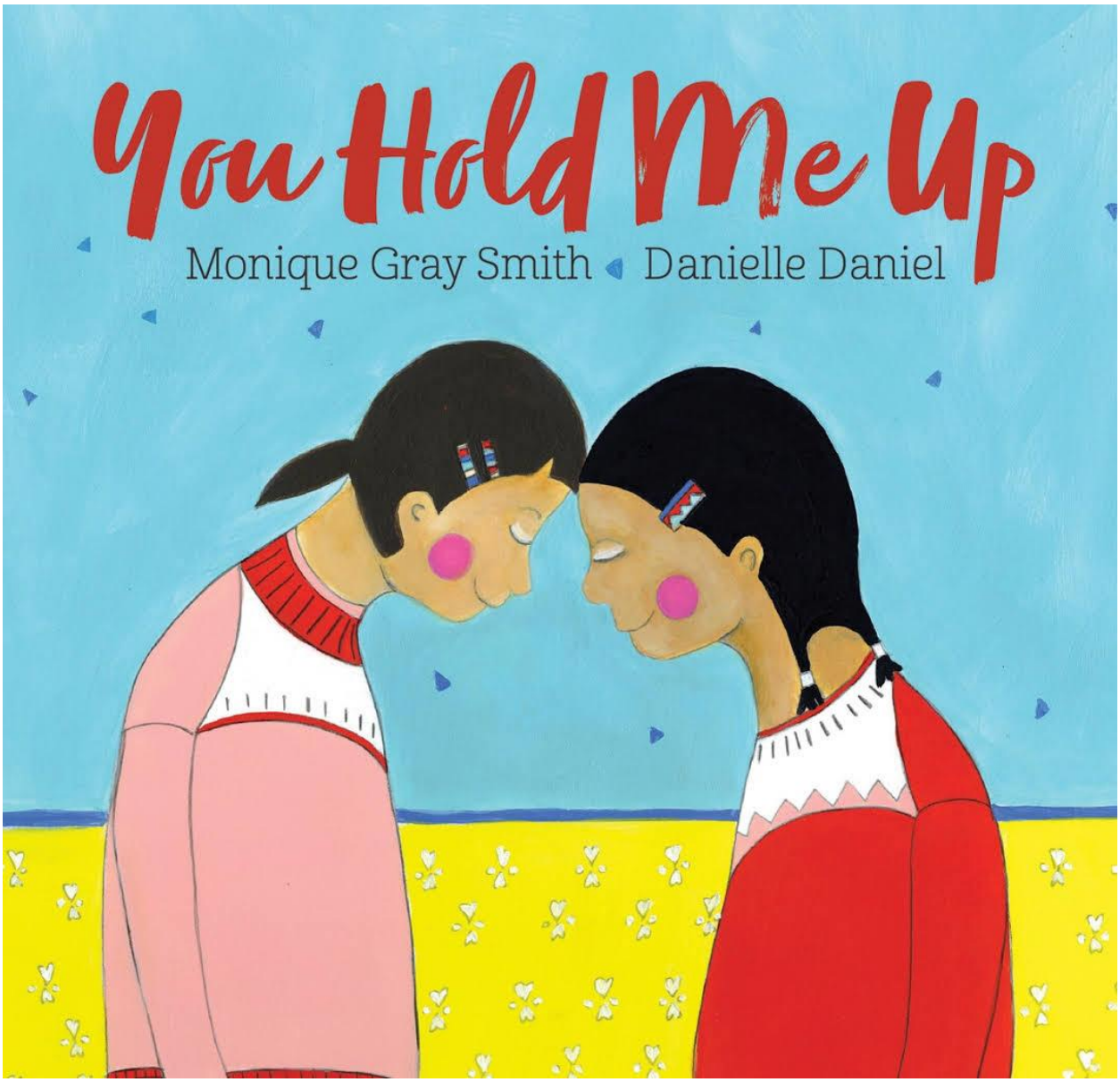
For Grades K to 3

You Hold Me Up by Monique Gray Smith and Danielle Daniel



This story provides a perfect entry place for teaching very young students about Orange Shirt Day, residential schools and reconciliation. However, rather than talking directly about residential schools and their impact, Monique Gray Smith has chosen to focus on describing ways we can move forward "in the spirit of reconciliation" (see dedication) by supporting and caring for each other. Her words are positive, heart warming, and gentle. The illustrations are childlike, colourful and engaging. Note how the characters lips are often hearts and almost every picture includes nature (even the wallpaper has flowers or leaves!).

You Hold Me Up is a beautifully written story that helps children understand the importance of kindness, respect and empathy. As Gray Smith says, "it is a book about love, building relationships and fostering empathy "(see Author's Note at the back of the book). While the story is aimed at our youngest students, it could be used with older students.

Possible Lesson Plan:

Show the book cover and ask the children what they think the title means. What does it mean to "hold somebody up?" It may take some discussion to help students understand the difference between literally holding somebody up vs. figuratively holding somebody up. Physical demonstrations and verbal examples may be useful and engaging ☺. Record children's predictions/thoughts on chart paper. What do the children think the story will be about – literally or figuratively "holding" somebody up?

Ask children to listen and look at the illustrations carefully as you read the story through once then read again slowly, stopping for lots of discussion. Ask the children to explain what they think "You Hold Me Up" means in the story. Can they give examples from the story? How do the characters help each other? Ask students to think of a way(s) that people in their lives hold them up. Then ask the children for examples of how they hold up others. Allow time for each child to share – consider a Sharing Circle format. Record children's responses as appropriate.

Follow-up activity might include children drawing a picture(s) and/or scribing their examples to the teacher and putting up a display in the room divided into two sections such as: "Others Holding Me Up" and "Me Holding Others Up". This display would make a great reference when problem solving or discussing how we should treat each other at school and at home.

Relate to Orange Shirt Day by talking about Canadian history (teachers may need to explain "history" first). Aboriginal people (First Nations, Metis and Inuit) in Canada have not always been treated the way the book describes. Depending on maturity, prior knowledge, etc., of students, teachers may want to give a gentle history of residential schools in Canada (with lots of reassurance) and explain that Orange Shirt Day is a day we remember the people who went to residential schools and a day we practice treating everybody the way the author would like us to, etc.

Other Follow Up Activities:

If your school is doing a school wide celebration of Orange Shirt Day, your class may be asked to decorate small or large paper orange "t-shirts". In any case, teachers may want to make an Orange Shirt Day display of students' artwork or words about how they feel about Aboriginal people being treated unkindly in the past and/or how we need to treat all children everywhere because "**Every Child Matters"** no matter what culture or nationality they belong to. See blank t-shirt template at the back of this booklet. See the art activity suggested for *Amik Loves School* for another option.

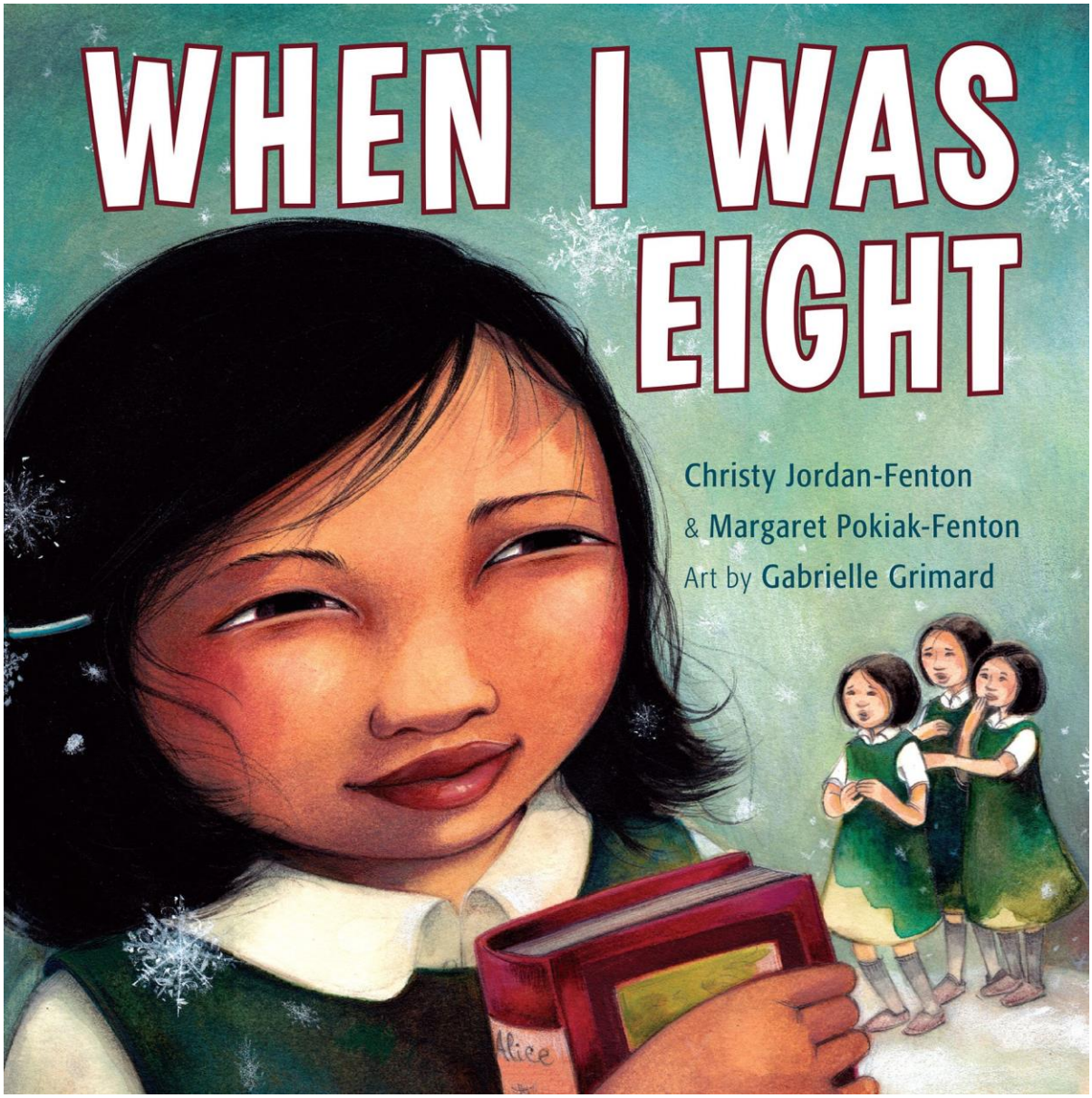
Note: Monique Gray Smith is also the author of *Speaking Our Truth: A Journey of Reconciliation*, written for middle readers.

For Grades 3 and Up

When I Was Eight by Christy Jordan-Fenton & Margaret Pokiak-Fenton

Note: A narrated version of this story is available in its entirety on YouTube. Very well done and handy if you do not have a copy of the book. Go to:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSBrkJn3NeI



This story about a young Inuit girl who goes to residential school provides an age appropriate introduction to what residential schools were like. The story also gives another opportunity to discuss symbolism except here, instead of an orange shirt, we have red stockings.

Students might do a Venn Diagram or Double-Entry Journal to pull-out information that is similar in Phyllis' story and *When I Was Eight*. For example, taking away the orange shirt is quite similar to being given the red stockings – both were a way to hurt, humiliate and dehumanize. Removal of the orange shirt was a way to take away Phyllis' sense of identity, individuality and pride. Forcing Olemaun to wear the red stockings was a way to embarrass, humiliate, and bring negative attention to her.

Ask students how they would feel if something like this happened to them? If they got a special dress, shirt or outfit that was taken away the first day of school? What about some of the other things that happened to Margaret/Olemaun? Be sure to reassure children, as necessary, that this would not happen today in our schools, but it did happen to too many Indigenous children. It made them feel like they were not important and did not matter. We want to remember how sad and difficult it was for so many Indigenous children. We want to show how much we care and understand how unfair and cruel these schools were. We want everyone to know we understand that "**Every Child Matters"** and schools must be fair and equal for **all** children in Canada. To show how much we care, we are going to make and wear "orange shirts" today. It will be like giving Phyllis her orange shirt back many times over!! Do you think that would help Phyllis and other indigenous people feel happier? Why?

Provide copies of orange cardstock "t-shirts" with "**Every Child Matters**" and allow children to decorate them as they desire. They are welcome to use words, pictures or any other appropriate design. Consider putting t-shirts up as display.

Resilience of Aboriginal children is another important subject to discuss with students. Both Phyllis and Olemaun were incredibly resilient. Despite the dreadful things that happened to them, they were strong enough to withstand the hardships, survive residential school and go on to help and influence others! Ask students how they think they would manage if they had to go away to a residential school? What were some of the strategies or ways the girls managed to be so resilient? E.g., Olemaun thought of her father's presence, thought of her book, and got angry. Phyllis was able to heal after residential school and now helps others understand and advocate equality for all. Have children come up with these and other ideas. Record.

The sequel to this story is ***Not My Girl*** which is about how difficult life was for Margaret when she returns home, a stranger in her own community.

For Grade 5 and Up

fatty legs by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton
a stranger at home by Christy Jordan-Fenton

The authors wrote ***fatty legs*** and ***a stranger at home*** first and then published the foregoing for younger students. ***fatty legs*** and ***a stranger at home*** are aimed at students in grade 5 and up. They are longer books and would make excellent Literature Circle or read aloud novels.

For High School Students:

Teachers could take the foregoing issues/concepts to a much deeper level. For example, talk about equality and equity today in schools. Have students research what school is like today for many Indigenous youth. Do they have access to the same quality of education as other children in Canada? What about health care? The fact is, too many Aboriginal students still go to uncomfortable, unsafe, ill-equipped schools and do not receive the same educational or health care resources as other Canadian students.

Excellent resources/ideas for high school students can be found at:

Project of Heart – *Illuminating the hidden history of Indian Residential Schools in BC*
www.bctf.ca/HiddenHistory/

Project of Heart links booklet
www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/AboriginalEd/PoH/Project%20of%20Heart%20Resource%20Booklet.pdf

Residential Wreck – Song and poem *www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHisNlnal8s&feature=youtu.be*

Residential Wreck

When I was four
Life was simple and fun
Surrounded by people who loved me
I had sisters and brothers
A dad and a mom
In a home where I could live happy
Felt safe there and warm
Like a kiss from the sun
Today it's just a fond memory
The day I turned five
My mother she cried
'Cause she knew they were coming to take me

Saw dust up the road
And knew I'd been told
The time had come for hiding
They searched high and low
From houses to the shore
They dragged me off kicking and screaming
When I got to the school
Saw some faces I knew
None of those children were smiling
They took me away
Scrubbed me down, made me stay
In a uniform racial cleansing

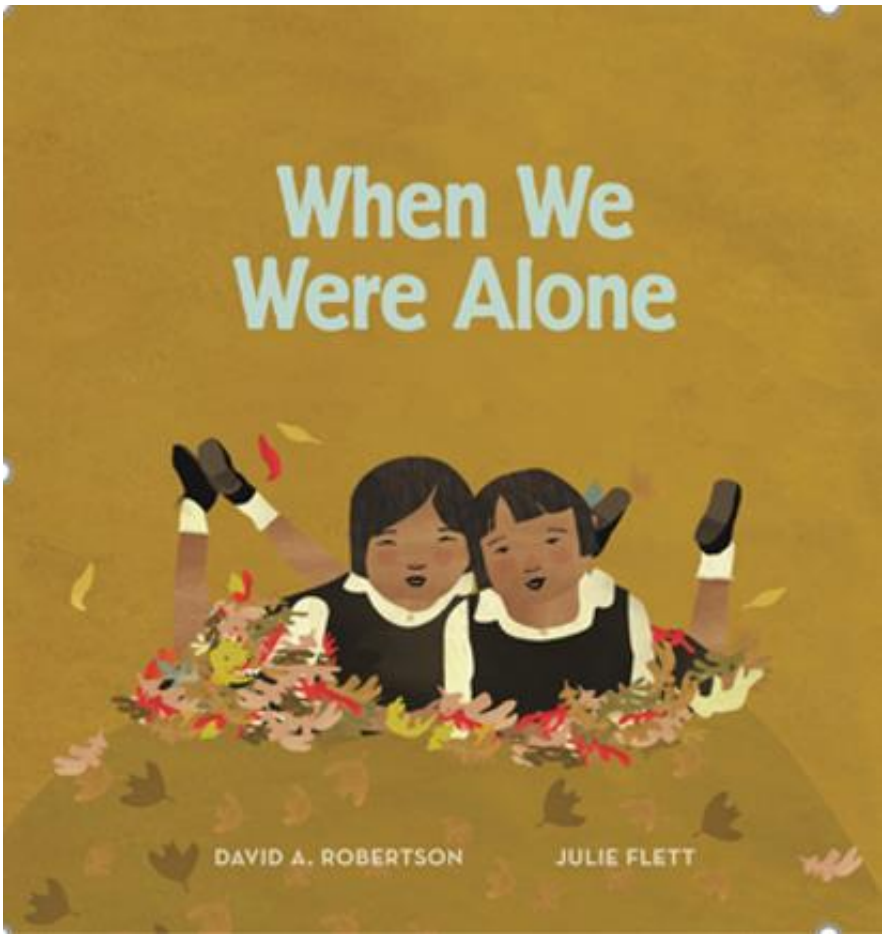
They gave me a number
Took away my name
Forced me to speak a new language
The pain that I felt
With every sting of their belt
To break me and change me through anguish
I was a savage they said
Better off dead
Their god did nothing to save me
They used that black book
Like a weapon and took
All of the things I believed in

Now I'm full grown
With kids of my own
I look in their eyes and it's haunting
Time fades the fear
But the memories seared
As a victim to parent it's daunting
I make the choice
To take up a voice
So others will know my story
I'll stand with a fist
For my people, for justice
To heal and pass on our history

My hope is one day
These deep scars will fade
This pain will stop hurting my children
I'll accept your sorrys
Once you've heard our stories
And help us to carry this burden

For Grades 2 to 7

When We Were Alone, by David A. Robertson, Illustrated by Julie Flett



This is a beautifully written and illustrated story aimed at younger audiences; however, it could easily be used from grade two to grade seven. For older students, literary elements could be a secondary focus. The story would likely be too much for kindergarten children in September (Orange Shirt Day is at the end of September). We recommend using *Amik Loves School* for kindergarten and possibly grade one and two.

Background Information:

CBC has an interesting radio interview with the author, David Robertson, along with a video of a local elder and girl reading the book out loud. Go to:

www.cbc.ca/books/when-we-were-alone-1.4119444

During the interview, David Robertson explains that he wanted to write a story for young children that dealt with the history of residential schools in a "gentle" and "sensitive" way. He

hopes his book will act as a "foundation" upon which younger children can begin to understand a history he feels all Canadians must learn about. This book does exactly what he wants it to.

Hearing the Elder and young girl reading the story could be a powerful experience for students, particularly if the teacher holds a copy of the book up so children can see the beautiful illustrations while it is being read. Certainly, for non-Indigenous speakers, hearing the story is helpful for hearing the correct pronunciation of unfamiliar words. Older students could adopt the roles of Nokom (Grandmother) and Nosisim (Granddaughter) and present the story as a dramatic piece in their own classroom, with each student reading a part(s) (perhaps in a sharing circle). Having rehearsed thoroughly with their own classmates, these students could then go and "perform" the story to younger classes during Orange Shirt week. Older children could serve as "experts" for the younger children, which is always a powerful learning experience for both sets of students.

Highlights of the Story

Orange Shirt Day honours all the students who went to residential school and had their identity stripped away. Phyllis Webstad had her new, bright orange shirt taken away the moment she arrived at residential school and orange shirts have become a symbol for September 30th. This fits in beautifully with the beginning of *When We Were Alone.* The story begins with Nokom and Nosisim talking about how Nokom loves to wear lots of bright colours and grow lots of brightly coloured flowers and plants. It is "like she dresses in rainbows". We find out Nokom likes to surround herself with colour because of what happened to her at residential school. At residential schools, "They wanted us to look like everybody else." And so, the story goes, with the Granddaughter asking questions that her Grandmother answers, all the while gently informing the reader about residential schools; this is balanced by what Nokom did then and now to try and be happy. The story is also one of resilience and resistance or, as the author says, "a story of empowerment and strength." Nokom survived residential school by refusing to give up her identify and finding brief moments of happiness. Nokom now surrounds herself with friends, family, colour, beauty and everything that make her feel happy. Nokom is a strong woman who tells us at the end of the story where she finds the most strength and happiness. She tells her granddaughter, "I am always with my family."

Powerful Literary Elements Worthy of Study in Relation to Orange Shirt Day

Repetition - Repetition is used very effectively in this story and powerfully drives home the message of negativity, cruelty and loss of identity. Note the author never names the people or agency running the residential schools. He refers to this dark, nameless entity(ies) as "they" throughout the story. Discuss this with students – do they think it is effective? Why? Can they give examples?

There are many examples in the story that, when put together, provide a powerful summary of what residential schools were like. Ask students to pull these out and comment on the message(s) these statements give.

"they gave us different clothes … They didn't like that … They wanted us to look like everybody else … they cut off all our hair … They didn't like that we were proud … They wanted us to be like

everybody else … they wouldn't let us speak our words … They didn't like that we spoke our language … They wanted us to talk like everybody else … they wouldn't let us be together … They didn't like when we were with family"

Similarly, the repetition of "But at the school I went to, far away from home …" keeps driving home the sense of distance from home and loneliness felt by the children.

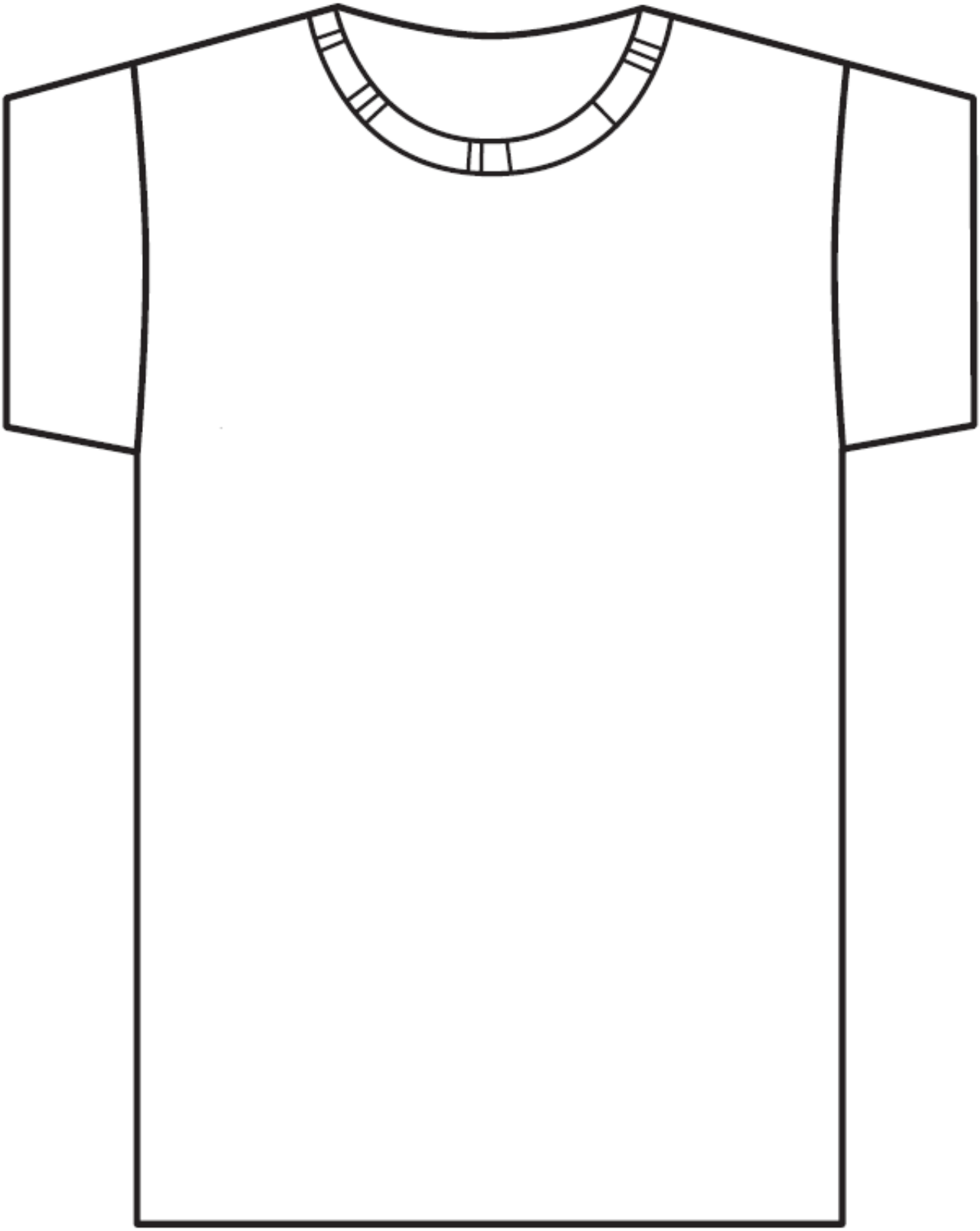
Repetition is also used to stress Grandmothers strength and resistance to what "they" were trying to do to the children. Despite the schools best efforts to destroy her spirit, Grandmother found ways to remember home and be happy, if only for a few moments. Of course, "happy" and "happiness" are words even very young children easily understand and relate to.

"we would be colourful again. And this made us happy … we would have long hair again. And this made us happy … we would whisper to each other in Cree … And this made us happy … we would hold hands, so we could be with each other. And this made us happy."

Similarly, the repetition of "When I was your age, at home in my community" reminds us over and over of how important home and family is to Grandmother (and, of course, the other students at residential school.)

Figurative Language – The author's use of similes creates powerful descriptions that children can understand easily and connect to emotionally. The story has many similes, which can be sorted into the positive, joyful ones of home versus the negative, discordant ones of residential school.

"It's like she dresses in rainbows." (home)
"She was like a chameleon." (home)
"We all mixed together like storm clouds." (residential school)
"Her braid hung almost as low as the vines. It was like she had a tail." (home)
"Our strands of hair mixed together on the ground like blades of dead grass." (residential school)
"There was a bird flying through the air like a jingle-dress dancer." (home)
"Our voices blended together like a flock of crows." (residential school)
"My kokom and my uncle talked and laughed like children." (home)
"My brother and I were separated like day and night." (residential school)

Have students pull out the similes in the story and, depending on their age, explain the meanings. How did the use of similes create powerful descriptions or emotions in just a few words? Ask students to sort the similes into ones written about Grandmother's time at residential school and ones written about her time at home. What do children notice? Challenge students to create their own similes either in place of the ones in the story or for other strong emotions the students at residential school must have felt. These similes would make a powerful wall display. Students could then create a second display of similes about how children should feel at school. How do the students in your class feel about their experiences at school?

Young students could create paintings of either life at residential school or at home and give one word to describe the feeling their picture is about.