

# Truth, Honour, and Care on Orange Shirt Day

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*This article was written in 2021 shortly after the first discovery of children's remains near a residential school.*

## September 30<sup>th</sup> is known as Orange Shirt Day across Canada

The recent discovery of mass grave sites at several Residential Schools in Canada has retraumatized many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples including Indigenous staff and students at Cégeps and universities. Many communities have had to call in teams of psychologists, social workers and elders to deal with the effects of the uncovering of mass graves. The discovery of the mass graves has finally confirmed what First Nations, Inuit, and Métis survivors of residential school have been talking about: the murdered children have finally been found.

Cégeps and universities must remember that there is a diverse population of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students attending the various institutions. We have to be mindful of how we proceed with Orange Shirt Day activities from now on. We need to be profoundly aware of the trauma that still exists in most communities. Impacts of colonization have been detrimental in so many ways. We see multi-generational trauma, addictions, mental health crises, as well as the epidemic of suicide in the North. **How do we move forward with reconciliation, without retraumatizing the victims and creating more harm?**

We must remember that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples are the original people of this country. They are self-determining people and have treaty, constitutional, and human rights that must be recognized and respected.

Reconciliation requires sustained public education and dialogue about the history and legacy of residential schools. **On September 30, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students should have the right to be excused from classes with no consequences so they can reflect in their own way.** Many will spend time with family and friends.

We must remember that reconciliation is a process of healing relationships that requires public truth. Sharing apologies and commemorations must acknowledge and address the past harms.

## The Indian Residential School System

The goal of the Indian Residential Schools was to assimilate Indigenous Peoples as part of the broader project of settler colonialism in Canada, which established Canadian governmental control of Indigenous lands. The Canadian government and various Christian churches ran Indian Residential Schools in most provinces from 1870s until the last one closed in 1996. More than 150,000 Indigenous children between the ages of 4-16 attended.

The traumatic experiences of children who attended these schools are well documented<sup>1</sup> (see for example). Residential Schools were like prisons and Survivors' testimonies report that:

- Children were punished for speaking their own Indigenous languages, and had to learn English or French
- Children were forbidden from practicing their own cultures, and forced to convert to Christianity
- Children were stripped of their own clothing, washed with harsh chemicals, their hair was cut short or shaved off
- Food was lacking in quantity and quality, rotten food was sometimes served
- Forced labor in unsafe work environments, exposure to cold without warm clothing
- Siblings were not allowed to communicate, letters and gifts from family were withheld
- Physical, verbal, emotional and sexual abuse, including electric shock, withholding medical attention, force-feeding of own vomit, racist language, solitary confinement, scalding, rape, forced sterilization and abortions were reported
- Murder

<sup>1</sup>See for example: <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/backgrounders/2015/12/15/final-report-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-canada> or <https://www.anishinabek.ca/an-overview-of-the-schools>

## What is Orange Shirt Day?

In 1973-1974 Phyllis (Jack) Webstad attended the Mission School for one school year at the age of 6 years old. Phyllis lived with her grandmother on the Dog Creek reserve. In her own words she explains: "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 the front and was so bright and exciting-just like I felt 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 colour orange has always reminded me of that time, and how my feelings did not 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."<sup>2</sup>

The orange shirt symbolizes the cruelty of life at the residential schools, the attempt to strip First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students of their identity and self-worth. Most if not all children who attended residential schools were stripped of their names. They often did not receive new names; they were given a number. This is similar to the dehumanization that occurred with the Jewish people in Germany during the Holocaust.

"Every Child Matters" is the slogan that has been used on the orange shirts. It is relevant today because many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children are still not treated equally. In June 2021 after the discovery of the murdered children it was recommended in parliament that Canada honor the residential school survivors and their families by calling a national holiday on September 30<sup>th</sup>. Most provinces agreed. Quebec did not agree to designating September 30<sup>th</sup> a National Holiday. The Legault government stated that we have enough holidays in Quebec already. This is the same government that refuses to recognize systemic racism in Quebec, even after the death of Joyce Eshaquan, who recorded her own death in hospital on Facebook live; and even after the Viens Commission report<sup>3</sup> confirmed that there is systemic racism in Quebec.

### The Blanket Exercise and Trauma-Informed Training for All

In this new era of reconciliation it is time for Cégeps and universities to look at integrating the Kairos blanket activity, which teaches the history of colonization in Canada<sup>4</sup>. All teachers, staff, and students should be required to take the training. Training on the Residential School system should also be implemented for all staff and students. It is time for educational institutions to reconcile with the past and understand their responsibility to speak the truth. If Cégeps are serious about reconciliation, they need to make real changes that show true commitment to reconciliation. Another way to do this is to provide trauma-informed training to the entire college community.

## What are the protocols when having Elders speak about their experiences in Residential Schools?

When you invite guest speakers to present at Cégeps and universities, tobacco can be offered. Elders are often given tobacco as a gesture but not all Indigenous Peoples are familiar with the tobacco offering. If it is not accepted, do not be offended.

We should always consider payment for the Elder who comes and speaks about their experiences. Many Elders are on a fixed income and it costs them money to travel to the campus. We are asking for their time, commitment, and their knowledge and experiences on these topics. An honorarium should cover meals, travel, and the time the Elder spent with the students and/or staff.

If the Elder accepts to talk about their experiences at the Residential School, they may not cover a topic that you have a question about. Make sure you are respectful if asking a question. Do not ask if someone was abused physically, sexually, spiritually, or mentally if they do not share that information with you. The survivor may not be ready to share such personal information with the participants. Pushing them to do so

<sup>2</sup><https://orangeshirtday.org/phyllis-story/#story>

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.cerp.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/Fichiers\\_clients/Rapport/Summary\\_report.pdf](https://www.cerp.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/Fichiers_clients/Rapport/Summary_report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup><https://www.kairosblanketexercise.org/>

may have traumatic consequences for the speaker that we are not equipped to handle. Please do not ask what positives came out of Residential Schools. For many survivors, there were no positive experiences.

## **Are there certain books, or movies, that would be helpful to watch before Orange Shirt Day?**

Since the 2000's there are some powerful movies being made that depict life in the Residential Schools.

Warning: They are very graphic and can be hard to watch if you have experienced trauma. I would recommend that teachers watch them first, before sitting down with your students to view the movies and offer aftercare. Here are a few:

- *Rabbit Proof Fence*. 2002 (Aboriginal People in Australia).
- *We Were Children*. 2012 (Residential School in Canada).
- *Indian Horse*. 2013 (Young hockey player who attended a Residential School, Canada)

## **Orange Shirt Day after the discovery of children's remains near Residential Schools**

Many Cégeps and universities are moving away from large presentations and activities for September 30. We want to give students and faculty time to process what has transpired since the uncovering of the thousands of unmarked gravesites in both Canada and the United States. Many families are still at the beginning of having the children identified through DNA samples. Once the determination has been confirmed the bodies need to be brought back to the communities and buried with their families.

One suggestion is to have a moment of silence on September 30, at 9:00 a.m. to honor the children who never made it home.

We can offer a private luncheon in all of the Indigenous student centers for Indigenous students. Centers in different Cégeps may coordinate to have a feast for all First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students and staff. The purpose of the feast? To quietly honour the children and their families who attended residential schools. There may need to be a Talking Circle<sup>5</sup>. Students may need space to process their feelings about the experiences. Many of the students are dealing with trauma and may be second and third generation survivors. Elders, Indigenous social workers, and/or healers should be present to guide and support.

Faculty, students, and volunteers can hold an awareness activity in a campus public space to talk about Phyllis Webstad and the Orange Shirt initiative. Encourage everyone to wear an orange shirt. Provide the orange shirts for sale in an accessible space. Encourage all staff and students to wear orange to remember the children who never made it home.

The college library could be on site to offer books and resources. Films that depict the Residential School experience can be screened. We can invite guest speakers, possibly a panel of survivors, their children and community members.

<sup>5</sup>See "Talking Circles" @ <https://fppse.net/project/how-we-learned/>