



The  
Manitoba  
Teachers'  
Society



# EVERY CHILD MATTERS

ORANGE SHIRT DAY  
SEPTEMBER 30

In recognition of the harm the residential school system did to children's sense of self-esteem and wellbeing, and as an affirmation of our commitment to ensure that everyone around us matters.

## I Lost My Talk

by Rita Joe

I lost my talk  
The talk you took away.  
When I was a little girl  
At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away:  
I speak like you  
I think like you  
I create like you  
The scrambled ballad, about my world.

Two ways I talk  
Both ways I say,  
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,  
Let me find my talk  
So I can teach you about me.

### BIOGRAPHY

Rita Joe (née Rita Bernard), poet (b at Whycocomag, NS 15 March 1932; d at Sydney, NS 20 March 2007). Rita Joe was born and spent her childhood on a Mi'kmaq Reserve at Whycocomag on Cape Breton Island. She lived with foster families after her mother's death when she was just 5 years old. Orphaned when she was 10, Rita Joe left the island at the age of 12 to go to the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School on mainland Nova Scotia. Rita Joe later returned to Cape Breton to live on the Eskasoni First Nations Reserve, where she and her husband raised 10 children, including 2 adopted sons.

Rita Joe recalled being told constantly, at the Residential School, "You're no good." She began writing herself to challenge such negative messages, which she encountered again as an adult, in the books her own children were reading. In the prologue to her memoir, Rita Joe states, "My greatest wish is that there will be more writing from my people, and that our children will read it.

I have said again and again that our history would be different if it had been expressed by us."

Taken from: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/rita-joe/>

### POEM ANALYSIS

#### I lost my talk

My language, My cultural identity, My worldview which defines who I am.

#### The talk you took away

Two primary goals of the residential school system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture by taking away their language and cultural identity.

#### When I was a little girl at Shubenacadie school.

Rita Joe attended the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School in Nova Scotia starting at age 12.

#### You snatched it away:

**I speak like you**

**I think like you**

**I create like you**

#### The scrambled ballad, about my word.

Prior to attending Residential School students were fluent in their language and the cultural norms, values, beliefs and practices of their Nation and community. Once at the school, ever, students were punished for speaking their language and were told that how they had come to understand the world was wrong. The foundation of any culture is the language. Without the language your understanding of the world changes and your thinking is framed by the English language which disconnects you from an Indigenous worldview. She acknowledges that the things that define who she is (language and culture) have been scrambled. It's not lost but it has been buried by the residential school system.

#### Two ways I talk,

**Both ways I say,**

**Your way is more powerful**

Here Rita Joe talks about knowing two cultures and two languages. However, she acknowledges that because of policies such as those that supported Residential Schools and the Indian Act, English and Eurocentric worlds have more power.

#### So gently I offer my hand and ask,

**Let me find my talk**

**So I can teach you about me.**

She is asking for the opportunity to reclaim her culture, identity and language so that the settler-Indigenous relationship can be based on harmony, on justice and on reconciliation.



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## Connecting I Lost My Talk with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Developed by the Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit with funding provided by the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth.

**This lesson provides students with the opportunity to investigate what it means to lose one's cultural identity.**

### INSTRUCTION

- a. Read the poem "I Lost My Talk" by Rita Joe.
  - This poem and a brief biography of poet Rita Joe is included with the poem
- b. Discuss the following questions with students:
  - What do you think this poem is about?
  - What rights from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child do you think are relevant to it?
  - How is a person affected when these rights are denied?
  - What message do you think the author is trying to convey in her poem?
- c. Read the obituary for Rita Joe.
  - This obituary of poet Rita Joe can be found online at [http://www.gov.ns.ca/abor/docs/news/Rita\\_Joes\\_Obituary\[1\].pdf](http://www.gov.ns.ca/abor/docs/news/Rita_Joes_Obituary[1].pdf)

### ASSESSMENT

Rita Joe's poem and her obituary express ideas about how Rita Joe viewed the importance of knowing a person's culture and understanding cultural identity. Ask students to write a short paragraph about why it is important to understand one's own culture and the cultures of others. Ask students to include a quote from Rita Joe's poem "I Lost My Talk" or from her obituary to help explain their ideas. Students could also choose to write their own poems about their own cultures.