Validating Cultural Identity in the Classroom

by Maria Ishikawa, Program Assistant for Friends of Simon Tutoring Program, Simon Fraser University

The lasting implications of curriculum and teacher-student relationships on cultural identity formation

Can you think back to a time when someone close to you said something that allowed you to really believe in yourself? A comment that validated your self-perceptions? Was it a mentor, a family member, or a teacher? Maybe the comment pushed you to become the teacher you are today. Or maybe the remark made you think twice about doing something that could have changed the course of your life.

I am currently working as a tutor for the Friends of Simon Tutoring Program at Simon Fraser University (SFU). Paul Shaker (former dean, professor emeritus, and founder of the program) was sitting across from me as we discussed the program’s future. After the retreat ended, Paul approached me and said, “Wow, the way you’re talking sounds like you could be a professor.” My heart stopped and I was speechless. A few weeks later, we were meeting for coffee...
and conversing on possible master’s and PhD programs. The status and authority Paul has earned throughout his valuable work in education and the community added an exceeding amount of impact to his remark and contributed to the decisions I have made to continue down this path of education.

Thinking back to your own life-impacting remark, I'm sure some of you thought of past teachers. In elementary school, when someone said you were a “good reader,” you probably rose your hand higher when they asked for a volunteer to read from the book. The authoritative role teachers assume adds weight to their behaviors. Their words and their actions become mantras in our academic and personal lives; they shape who we become inside and outside of the classroom walls. Overt teacher actions, such as comments, discipline, or classroom management styles, have direct consequences on their students. However, more covert forms of action, such as curriculum selection and its framing, can have subliminal repercussions on student identity. In particular, they can support or demoralize a student’s self-perceptions, personal values, and beliefs, and continue well after their time in education.

I specifically remember in secondary school how hard I tried to be white, and I couldn’t express enough how much I hated being Asian. At the time, I shrugged it off. In the back of my mind, I knew there was something wrong with feeling that way about my ethnicity, but I never questioned it. I consciously avoided hanging out with the “Asian crowd,” and remember people always telling me that I was “cool” because I was “more white than the other Asians.” Of course, this boosted my confidence and I continued to push away my Asian identity. This was confusing to me when I went home at the end of the day because my father is full Japanese, and we had an immense amount of Japanese influence in my home. When I moved to Canada to attend SFU, I was introduced to Paulo Freire and bell hooks, and I had a lightbulb moment. I finally had a language to describe the way I’ve felt about myself my entire life. I internalized the hegemonic power structure to the point where the only way I knew myself was through wanting to be someone else, and I realized how damaging these thoughts were to my personal identity.

To begin understanding cultural identity and its impact on student self-confidence, I will be examining the two “sites of impact”—curriculum and student-teacher relationships—where cultural identity is highly influenced by teachers and has lasting effects on feelings of self-worth.

Curriculum

While teachers cannot specifically choose the curriculum they teach, they do have the ability to determine how they will teach that information. Teaching Canadian history is rightfully important, but overlooking the narratives of different cultural groups associated with certain political movements, events, or policies delegitimizes their space in the classroom and in their social realities. Only sharing colonial perspectives on colonial events and ignoring conversations pertaining to racial stereotypes and inequalities are acts of omission on the teacher’s part, sending a subliminal message of non-dominant cultures and identities being “less than” compared to those who are a part of the dominant race. Christine Parker’s book Peacebuilding, Citizenship, and Identity: Empowering conflict and dialogue in multicultural classrooms (2016) explores the benefits of including conversations about racial tensions in the classroom. With teacher support, students begin to feel comfortable in the classroom environment and become active participants in critical discussions about race. Parker states, “Critical teaching that integrates students’ diverse identities encourages self-directed responses and perspectives” (2016, pg. 158).

Most of us know the feeling of finding a personal connection in our assignments, allowing curiosity to flourish, but when historical events are presented through a hegemonic, colonial consciousness, or when minority perceptions are omitted from the discourse, students of color are directed to view themselves through the lens of the oppressor, significantly reducing any personal connection to the material. As a Japanese-American, I noticed the lessons on the Japanese internment camps were sanitized of the embedded discrimination, and I was never prompted to question why Japanese people were forced out of their homes and relocated. This oppressive history continues to affect me in the present day. The stereotypical perceptions and remarks of “you’re cool because you act white” contribute to the ways I view my identity. I realized that my cultural identity was largely constructed through my experiences in school, and recognition of culturally diverse identities matter, whether that is recognition in the curriculum or by teacher interactions.
**Teacher-Student Relationships**
The interactions that occur not only among students, but among students and teachers may have the most significant impact on cultural identity formation. Teachers acquire the authority that allows them to validate students for their unique ways of being.

When learning about the Japanese internment camps at school, I would feel embarrassed for being associated with such an oppressive hardship. I would sink back into my chair and avert my eyes to the ground. The teacher could have used this topic as an opportunity to explain the repercussions of oppression, to explain how some discriminatory actions are repercussions of the colonial oppression throughout history, even broadening the topic to other cultural acts of oppression, such as slavery or residential schools. Instead of feeling embarrassed, I might have felt a sense of empowerment, and maybe then I would have felt a sense of validation for my identity.

Your relationship with a student of a different culture adds a sense of comfort in the classroom where they can share their own perceptions on matters of discrimination, and their voice can be a sign of personal strength while building up their confidence in their own identity. It creates a sense of belonging and confidence in oneself. It is an opportunity for the student to have knowledge to “teach the teacher” about something the teacher may not be an expert in.

**Suggestions**
All teachers are busy, and there is not a lot of time to spend individually with students, especially with the demands of crowded classrooms. However, from my personal experience, simple acts of recognition can translate into something meaningful, and do not need to take an extravagant amount of time. One-on-one moments can be something as small as learning your student’s name and pronouncing it correctly, which is a sign of respect to that student and to their cultural identity. Lastly, participating in acts of curiosity can speak volumes to students.

“Show and Tell” as an act of curiosity unfortunately phases out when students leave elementary school, but I think it is an effective activity that should continue well into secondary school. Not only does it physically connect students’ home and school life, it can also be used as a way of opening discussion about deeper topics in their culture, like their values and beliefs, and how that cultural artifact might still have an impact on them today.

**Conclusion**
Students are directly influenced by teachers through daily interactions and the presentation of curriculum, and these acts of recognition (or lack thereof) can have tremendous consequences on students’ cultural identity formation. A person’s culture is fundamentally intertwined with their way of existing in the world. It interacts with their mannersisms and behaviors, the language they use to convey their feelings and knowledge, and the insights they bring into the classroom. When an authoritative figure validates a student for their unique cultural identity, it normalizes all those pieces that intertwine with their culture and sends them a message of acceptance. As a teacher, being aware of your authority and how it manifests in overt and covert ways demonstrates responsibility, and using it responsibly means understanding that it has an immense impact on the construction of students’ cultural identity.

Using Freire as my guide, I am reclaiming my education as a *practice of freedom*, to become aware and critical of the instruction I have previously received in academia, and to further examine school in the sociopolitical sphere and its impact on cultural identity development. I am slowly relearning to embrace my Japanese culture and feel proud within myself as a Japanese woman. I struggle with it on a daily basis. You have a strong impact on the formation of cultural identity in the classroom. I ask you to move forward with a sense of curiosity and compassion for students’ cultural identities, and small acts of validation are key in ensuring students experience education as uniquely diverse, worthy people.

Everyone deserves to experience that.

To read the full version of this article, visit Maria Ishikawa’s blog at [www.awonderonwords.wordpress.com/2017/05/15/validating-cultural-identity-in-the-classroom/](http://www.awonderonwords.wordpress.com/2017/05/15/validating-cultural-identity-in-the-classroom/).

**References**

Statement of Principles on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

That the following Statement of Principles on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion be adopted:

The BCTF is a democratic union that recognizes the importance of encouraging and supporting involvement by all members, while recognizing that some members have historically been marginalized. For the Federation to be at its best, all members must see themselves reflected in its goals, structures, and practices. The BCTF will strive to identify and eliminate barriers to participation through programs, procedures, by-laws, and policies supported by specified resources and education.

The BCTF supports equity, diversity, and inclusion within the union, the workplace, and in broader society and acknowledges that:

1. Discrimination and harassment must not be ignored and must be challenged and rectified.
2. Not all discrimination is deliberate or visible. Inadvertent, hidden, and systemic discrimination must be identified and addressed.
3. The marginalization of certain groups must be specifically recognized. These groups include, but are not necessarily limited to women; racialized workers; Indigenous people; people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, questioning, or two-spirit; people with disabilities; and those whose participation is impeded because of economic circumstances or family status.
4. Equal opportunity to participate in the Federation does not mean treating all members the same. Within a democratic framework, promoting the engagement of members of equity-seeking groups is a valid and necessary approach to reaching equal outcomes.
5. Federation programs and policies designed to eliminate barriers must not only do so, they must be widely seen to do so.

Women in leadership roles within the BCTF

That the BCTF hold an annual institute to support and encourage more women in undertaking leadership roles within the BCTF.

Recommendations 33, 34, 35, 36, 37

These recommendations included amendments to by-laws resulting in the addition of two designated positions to the BCTF Executive Committee, ensuring that the voice of Aboriginal members and racialized members are represented at the Executive Committee table.

Gender-neutral washroom at the BCTF

That the BCTF ensure that every building used for BCTF events or meetings have a designated gender-neutral washroom that is accessible to all members.

Gender-neutral language

That the BCTF encourage all attendees and speakers, including invited guests, at BCTF meetings to use gender-neutral language and provide a list of suggested terms.

Transgender rights

That the following be the statement of principles on transgender rights:

1. Trans or transgender be defined as “an encompassing term that describes many gender identities of people who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth.”
2. The Federation respects the right of individuals to self-identify their gender, and supports the right of any member to transition at any time. The Federation supports individuals’ autonomy to determine how and when they transition.
3. The Federation supports the rights of transgender people to inclusive and respectful working environments that adhere to the BC Human Rights Code, the Canadian Human Rights Act, and jurisdictional privacy laws, and are free of discrimination and harassment.
4. Where gender-specific language is not required, the Federation use gender-neutral language in its communications.
5. All transgender people be addressed by their chosen pronoun and name, and have the right to dress according to their gender identity and/or expression.
6. The Federation recognizes individuals’ rights to freely access bathroom and change room facilities that are gender neutral, and to access the bathroom and change room facilities that correspond to their gender identity or the group in which they are most comfortable.
7. The Federation recognizes individuals’ rights to access services that correspond to their gender identity.

8. The Federation addresses concerns of transgender people in a positive and proactive way with supportive resources and training.

9. The Federation encourages members to challenge gender stereotypes and integrate trans-positive content into the teaching of all subject areas in accordance with school board policies, procedures, and provincial legislation.

10. The Federation encourages school boards to put policies and procedures in place to protect the privacy and safety of transgender individuals. The status of an employee or student should only be disclosed with the consent of the individual on a need-to-know basis.

11. The Federation encourages school boards to address the concerns of transgender people in a positive and proactive way with supportive policies, procedures, resources, and training, including training for local leadership.

12. The province requires tenders for new school construction, seismic upgrades, and renovating of existing facilities to include universal changing places and gender-neutral washrooms.

13. The Federation demands that the province provide the support and necessary training for public sector workers to fulfill the spirit and intent of the recent expansion of the BC Human Rights Code.

Did you know that there is a tab on our website to assist you in carrying out these mandates? It can be found here: bctf.ca/EquityAndInclusion.aspx.

Equity and Inclusion
Learn how equity and inclusion became a priority of the BCTF. Read the equity and inclusion recommendations. Find out what actions and resources other unions are developing in this area.

Raising Awareness
The first step in acting to improve equity involves becoming more aware of barriers to equity and their impacts on members of equity-seeking groups. The short articles and videos found on this page introduce several topics that will increase our understanding of equity issues and allow us to move forward.

Tools
This page provides resources that will support locals in introducing equity and inclusion to their members, tools to help develop inclusive meetings, and workshops to explore these issues further.

Delving Deeper
For those interested in learning more about issues of equity and inclusion, this page provides articles, videos, books, websites, and podcasts that examine these issues at a deeper level.
**Why I Choose to Make Space**

by James Sanyshyn, Burnaby teacher, BCTF member-at-large (2014–17)

While filling out the Power Wheel exercise at the zone meetings this April, I was struck at the amount of privilege I have within our union and our larger society in general. Male. White. Citizen. Long-term BCTF member. Educated. Middle years. I would argue that even being gay and middle class, categories in the outer circle, still affords me so many opportunities in BC and Canada.

In other words, I have it made. There is nothing in writing that says I need to make space for anyone in my life, my community, or my union. I can speak freely and openly, and my voice will always be heard. My opinions will be considered. I may often hold influence over others because of who I am. So, why make space for others?

Because it is right and just to do so. Members of the LGBTQ community have fought long and hard to be seated at the table of heteronormative power. Why would I, an empowered gay man, not wish for others what I have been able to achieve?

Within the BCTF, our discussions regarding inclusion and equity have been happening for at least two years now. We have made great strides, but we still have so much to achieve. Are we doing as much as we can to make our union meetings inclusive?

We all have identities and privilege. We need to recognize that some of us have privileges that others do not. Take a look at who speaks most often or longest at our meetings. Do our most dominant speakers represent the membership? If not, how can we bring these voices to bear?

We heard through our equity audit that some of us do not feel valued, heard, or even safe at meetings. How can we foster the conditions conducive to these required conditions for building our movement? Our recent work as a union, including changing our commitment to solidarity and our Executive Committee composition, shows that we can and will walk the equity talk. Yet, some feel threatened as we talk about making space. Their voices matter and need to be heard as we struggle with transformative change. We can stop making assumptions about others. We can listen openly without running rebuttals through our minds the entire time. We can model inclusive and respectful language and debate. We can reach out to those who feel uncomfortable and include them in our journey towards inclusion and equity for all. We have made a commitment to equity and inclusion, the practice that acknowledges oppression and power imbalance in our union. This requires a removal of the influence of oppression, not individuals with privilege, because we all have some privilege! Systemic and individual oppression are different, but often run as parallel experiences. I have learned through my BCTF activism that my voice and contributions are valued and important. I strive to make space for all members so that they may share my experiences of union activism. I was heartened by our Annual General Meeting discussions, and I learned from listening to those who did not share my opinions.

As I leave the Executive Committee, I am confident that the work we have done and tried to undertake holds great value. Our new Executive Committee needs our support, fresh ideas, and engagement as we move forward on the transformation of the BCTF as the most diverse, inclusive, and equitable union in labour history.
Where Can I Possibly Start?

by Annie Ohana, Antipoverty Action Group, CASJ

Four lenses on Aboriginal infusion

This question is one I’ve heard time and time again. I’ve heard it in multiple contexts, from taking on social justice initiatives to Aboriginal curriculum infusion. This perceived frustration is one that I wish to dispel through four lenses: Goals, Strategies, Content, and Process.

I feel these four lenses would allow significantly easier access points for individuals that might not be steeped in Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Being, or have teaching concentrations which may be a tad more inflexible towards infusion of more “humanities-centered material,” (something which I don’t ascribe to, but have heard stated). These four lenses are meant to connect with the First Peoples Principles of Learning and the way that we utilise these principles in our classroom. A note from Sue Spalding, a fellow social justice advocate and colleague: Try taking one principle, talk it over as a staff, and see how it can be applied.

So, here goes nothing. Scratch that—here goes everything.

GOALS: When you look at what you are teaching, what goals do you have for your students? Are there ways that the First Peoples Principles of Learning could be utilized as goals in and of themselves?

STRATEGIES: When we consider Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy, can we utilize some of those strategies in our teaching? Rather than a top-down model, why not a decolonized understanding where the voices of students are central, and where the traditions of elders, community, and heritage are given more priority? Can a talking circle promote more dialogue and equality than desks lined up in columns?

CONTENT: I admit this is a difficult one. Based on the region, nation, and funding, resources might not be readily available. Nonetheless, inviting a speaker to share their lived experiences, that is content. Finding and exploring counter-narratives that put a new twist on our history, that is content. Student-generated content such as the amazing group N’we Jinan can provide such deep learning. Most Importantly, as a social justice union we need to promote the funding and development of First Nations resources, and capacity across the board (from federal to municipal to within Nations). We should not accept the old line of “here’s new curriculum, but no money for resources.” What we need to realize is that content-building builds up not just our libraries, but the strength of Nations to write their own stories, represent their own historical narratives, and stand strong in the hopeful reality of a true Nation-to-Nation relationship.

PROCESS: Questions regarding authenticity and appropriation are perhaps the two areas that cause the most consternation. If we address the very process of acquiring content and the use of strategies and pedagogies, we do not need to fear Aboriginal infusion. Yes, some background

ABORIGINAL WAYS OF KNOWING AND BEING

Learning is connected to land, culture, and spirit.

We—the two-legged, four-legged, finned and feathered, plants and rocks—are all related.

We must always practice reciprocity through acts of giving and receiving.

Learning honours our Ancestors, Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Descendants.

It respects and embraces ceremony, protocol, and teachings that are connected to the sacred medicines including tobacco, cedar, sage, and sweetgrass.

Important teachings emerge through stories.

Learning involves developing relationships, respecting distinct cultures, and honouring the perspective of others in our communities.

The deepest learning takes place through lived experience. It requires exploring our identities, learning from our mistakes, and having gratitude for our gifts.

Learning is a journey that takes courage, patience and humility.

It is about striving to become a better human being and living with balance in body, mind, heart and spirit.

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knowledge may be required, but in all honesty, that is what makes us the teaching professionals we are. Think for a second of sacred knowledge from other cultures. Many people who are not part of the Islamic faith are aware that the drawing of Mohammed is not permitted. Many people who are not Christian understand that the cross should not be desecrated. There are many more examples that suggest sacred knowledge is all around us, and that with understanding, we recognise the process we must carry out to use that knowledge. Therefore, in following process, ask an elder, do some research as to the content itself (totem poles, headdresses, drums, ceremony, etc.), ask for permission when using all content, and always stay as far away as possible from overarching generalities or cultural relativism that might take away from the knowledge itself.

I hope these four frameworks of Goals, Strategies, Content, and Process allow some relief from the anxiety some teachers feel. In attempting only one of the four frames and focusing on only one principle, realize that you are already infusing Aboriginal understandings and knowledge. No, you don’t need to be an expert; very few of us are. At the same time, what a wonderful thing it is for a teacher to say, “I am learning too,” and to promote the idea that knowledge acquisition never truly ends.

In the words of one of my students, Calista Robinson, and N’we Jinan’s song, “Hide and Seek,” “Reconciliation is in every time we learn.”

### Social Justice: Is it on your agenda?

**by Leon D’Souza, Antipoverty Action Group, CASJ**

Staff meeting! Okay, that might be the only time you see an exclamation mark after the words “staff meeting.” I’m sure many of us find ourselves looking at the clock, wondering when the meeting will end. Consequently, asking you to add another standing item to the agenda might not be appreciated, but I am still going to do it. The item is social justice, and it deserves our time. As educators, we need to apply the Social Justice Lens to everything we do in our schools. Social justice issues include antipoverty, antiracism, status of women, LGBTQ, peace and global education, and environmental justice. These are all issues that we, and our students, will encounter at some point in our lives. We do not live in a vacuum, and we do not learn in a vacuum.

By including social justice as a standing item on all of our staff meeting agendas, we can ensure that we are engaging all of our members. Many of us encounter these issues on different levels, some personal and some through the media. Some of us are in smaller, isolated communities where many global issues can pass under our radar. Some of us are in large, crowded cities where we are faced with these issues continuously and may become desensitized to them. Whatever our experiences may be, we need to be cognizant of how our students are making sense of the world around them. We need to make sure we are able to address issues that affect our students. By including social justice in every staff meeting, we will be able to integrate the Social Justice Lens into our learning. We have seen the shift towards integrating technology in our students’ learning, and we have seen that it works. We have made this shift because we know that our students’ lives are affected by technology, and our students’ lives matter to us. By consistently promoting social justice awareness at staff meetings, we will be able to show students that their lives matter to us.

Another important way to ensure that our practice is guided by the Social Justice Lens is to have social justice representatives (commonly known as social justice contacts) in our schools. Every school should have one, and many do. At the school level, a social justice contact can help inform, encourage, address, and advocate. A social justice contact is an organizer/leader who collaborates with staff members to identify social justice needs within the school and develop a plan to address these needs. They are a communicator by sharing relevant information through distribution and reporting at staff meetings. They are an advocate, familiar with the contract language, policies, curriculum, and school culture that relate to social justice. So, if your school has a social justice contact, get to know them. If your school does not have one, I strongly encourage you to consider taking on this important role. In addition, if you are already the social justice contact at your school, make yourself known; introduce yourself to your staff, perhaps at a staff meeting! Make yourself seen; let staff and students know that they can approach you for support with social justice issues. Most importantly, make yourself heard!
One Step at a Time:
A school club making a difference

by Prabh Mangat, Grade 12 student at Killarney Secondary School and President of the school club “One Step at a Time”

Often you hear people say, “We want to make a change and help our community.” As secondary students, we are taught to live by these words, but how often does change really take place? How often do we get caught up in our own lives, become too focused on ourselves, and forget about others?

The need to make a difference has led me and some of my friends to create a club at Killarney Secondary. It all started when three 15-year-old girls were hanging out and discussing their lives and the importance of taking action. I was one of those girls. Full of hope to create positive change among the less fortunate, we looked for possible ways to help. I remember being ecstatic about taking initiative at such a young age. Often, it seems as if our age determines our potential, but this project would prove otherwise. ➤

A. SOCIAL JUSTICE REPRESENTATIVE—SCHOOL LEVEL
1. Organizer/leader:
   a. collaborates with staff members to identify social justice needs and establish goals each year.
   b. develops, with other school union contacts, a social justice plan based on the goals for each year, using the Social Justice Lens as an analytical tool to aid in this process.
   c. carries out other social justice duties and responsibilities within the schools to meet the needs of teachers and students and the goals of the local social justice committee and the BCTF Committee for Action on Social Justice.
   d. is elected annually.

2. Communicator:
   a. receives and distributes relevant social justice and BCTF information.
   b. attends staff meetings to report on school, local, BCTF, and community social justice actions and opportunities.
   c. attends local meetings of school-based social justice representatives to provide liaison between the local and school-based social justice activities.
   d. participates in social justice representative training.

3. Advocate:
   a. is familiar with, and implements, contract language, BCTF policies, and local policies related to social justice in the everyday life of the school.
   b. serves as a school advocate for all teachers in matters related to social justice and its implementation in the curriculum, classroom, and the culture of the school.
   c. participates with other school-based social justice representatives in identifying appropriate new contract language and local and BCTF policies for social justice.
   d. works collegially with school union reps, PD reps, health and safety reps, and school committees.

B. SOCIAL JUSTICE REPRESENTATIVE—LOCAL LEVEL
1. Locals ensure each school in the district elects at least one school-based social justice representative.
2. Locals ensure the role and function of the school-based social justice representative is included in local policies.
3. Locals implement training programs for school-based social justice representatives.

C. SOCIAL JUSTICE REPRESENTATIVE—PROVINCIAL LEVEL (CASJ)
1. The BCTF will communicate to schools through the school union rep to the school-based social justice representative on all matters related to social justice, its implementation in the classroom, and the culture of the school.
2. The Federation will provide a SURT package to locals for school social justice representative training.
As our discussion progressed, we agreed to start something small and local. We decided on a school club called One Step at a Time, and began to gather resources and give assistance to men and women in poverty, the emotionally and physically abused women and children in East Vancouver, teenage foster/group homes, and students within our school.

Two years on, this club is a milestone in our secondary school experience. One Step at a Time is different from other clubs because it consists of 12 girls and only one male. This has led to recognizing that women and children are often the most vulnerable in our society. We then began supporting a rape relief shelter for women. We promote the shelter’s fundraising events, participate in annual transition house cleaning sessions, and are involved in their childcare programs. We have managed to build our own relationships with these women, and this makes us grow stronger as individuals. Although their experiences are different from our own, we have learned that the only way we can survive is by helping one another. Also, you never know when it might be you who is struggling for help and is in need of assistance.

Recently we heard about a florist who was gathering purses and filling them with healthcare products to donate. We decided to hold a purse drive in our school and bought products to put in them. We met with the florist, and she had thousands of donated purses in her shop. The sheer generosity of others was heartwarming. Inspired by her, we decided to work together on future projects.

We have also created our own Christmas care packages for foster/group homes, and have visited the Downtown Eastside offering warm clothing during the last brutal winter.

Our most ambitious project involved filling a suitcase with lined notebooks, colouring books, crayons, and Spanish reading books for children in Cuba. We travelled to Cuba in the spring and delivered the materials in person. Spending the day with the children and seeing the difference we made was one of the best experiences I have had, and it reminded me of why this club was created.

This club has also helped build friendships that I would have never experienced otherwise. We realize there are more important things to think about besides ourselves. This has allowed for us to become more well-rounded individuals.

Our most popular fundraiser is selling samosas in the school at lunch. It has also been one of our greatest learning curves and has taught us a lot about working together.

What started out as a small, innovative idea for change has led to interactions with members of the community we would not have had otherwise. We have also received immense support from other students. I have had countless discussions with my own teachers, and even other teachers who I only see in the hallways. They have all helped guide us and encourage our efforts. Some have promoted our drives in their own classrooms too.

All these experiences have led us to acknowledge our own privilege and appreciate the opportunities we have. We hope to motivate others at our school to volunteer. We also hope to continue working together after we graduate this June.

Although fundraising is a great introduction to social justice education, critical thinking needs to accompany it. Students should be guided to look at why they need to fundraise. The following lesson plans on TeachBC are great follow ups to a fundraiser.

- #rethinkgiving: www.bcpovertyreduction.ca/rethinkgiving
- Justice not Charity: teachbcdbcterf.ca/list?q=poverty&p=1&ps=25

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Homelessness and Addiction in Maple Ridge

by Dale Hardy, Social Justice 12 teacher at Riverside Centre

“I was brought out to Vancouver from a reserve near Yorkton, Saskatchewan. My husband had broken my legs and wanted to get me out of the community.” —A.P., First Nations female, 58 years old

Purpose
By 2013, homelessness and addiction became more visible in our community of Maple Ridge. The Salvation Army Caring Place, the local shelter, became the lightning rod for a community backlash. Critics described the Caring Place as a magnet that attracted drug addicts, and rumours abounded that many were outsiders. In public forums, some claimed that to clean up downtown Vancouver for the 2010 Olympics, addicts from the Downtown Eastside had been dumped in Maple Ridge. A homeless encampment emerged on Cliff Avenue, and vigilantism followed. As recently as April 2017, Maple Ridge Mayor Nicole Read has stayed away from council meetings due to personal threats of violence.

Our Social Justice 12 class at Riverside Centre wanted to make use of the strong relationships we had developed with the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), Alouette Addiction Services, Insite and Onsite, Sheway, Fraser Health, and the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) to give a voice to the marginalized and examine the role that access to housing—or the lack thereof—played in each individual’s struggle for stability.

Process
The backbone of our course is 1000 Dreams: Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the Fight for its Future by Larry Campbell, Neil Boyd, and Lori Culbert. Over the course of seven weeks, students toured VANDU, Sheway, Insite, and BC Excellence in HIV/AIDS Research. In addition, we had guest speakers from Fraser Health, Alouette Addiction Services, and CMHA outreach workers. We also had a former prisoner come speak to our class. With Heather Sivewright Parr of CMHA, we formulated a questionnaire. With Eddy Lake, a former prisoner at Kent Institution, we had practice interview sessions. Insite, CMHA, and Sheway all granted us access to clients and/or staff to interview.

Challenges
• The fentanyl crisis—VANDU specifically had grave concerns that money allotted for interviews could be a death sentence.
• Many of those interviewed did not have Social Insurance Numbers or banks accounts.
• Some of the students were outside of their comfort zone when interacting with the homeless. The experiential gap needed to be bridged.
• Confidentiality was required, and some organizations asked us not to use narratives that could identify an individual.

Conclusions
• In all interviews, individual trauma preceded the addiction.
• For Sheway, contacting women in their first trimester of pregnancy guaranteed housing, allowed enough time for a mother to take advantage of all the services Sheway offered, and created a foundation for her life after the program.
• Aboriginal women represent approximately 70% of Sheway’s clients.
Before Sheway’s inception in 1993, outcomes for pregnant women and their babies in the Downtown Eastside were grim. Almost one-half of the babies born to women living in this area had been exposed to alcohol and/or drugs in utero, with one-third experiencing a low birth weight. Women with no history of prenatal care would arrive at the hospital, give birth, and have their newborn babies taken into custody by Child Protection Services. The opportunity for these mothers to breastfeed their children, let alone parent, was nil.

In the 24 years since its birth, Sheway has seen a 70% success rate, meaning 70% of the women who access Sheway’s services are able to parent or maintain a relationship with their children in some capacity.

Sometimes a woman is able to access BC Housing, but is kicked out due to violence with a partner or boyfriend who damages their place. BC Housing will not rent to anyone having arrears on previous residences. It takes years to get housing on the BC Housing waitlist, and three to six months to get into transitional housing. The most immediate solution is a shelter, where they might have a roommate in addictions and have their few belongings stolen. Also, a woman in a shelter sometimes is threatened by the roommate in their room, and staff may have no evidence that the abuse is taking place. It is because of these situations that clients would rather couch surf or sleep outside.

A woman who is homeless will spend most of her day going to different drop-in centres to access services, or just to eat or find a safe place to stay warm. Often clients who are homeless state they use drugs because it helps with the hunger and trauma.

For women who are struggling with mental health issues, they need help with advocacy and filling out paperwork to get their needs met. A lot of clients have a short attention span and will work at one task with a worker over several days. These clients really struggle because their mental health issues and/or lack of appropriate medication may lead to aggressive behaviours which result in them being barred from certain services.

“When I found out I had Hep C, the nurse at Insite said there was treatment but I needed to have stable housing and the staff helped me get a place at Station Street and I brought my daughters out which has been great but I’d like to move them further away from the DTES before they join the party. I stopped using heroin because I [overdosed] at home and my youngest daughter found me and after that I said I’ll never never do that again. So, I got on methadone and been clean off heroin for over a year and I took the Pegatron Hep C treatment” —G.S., First Nations female, 45 years old

My name is Dale Hardy and I am the Social Justice 12 instructor at Riverside Centre SD 42. I would like to thank the staff at Sheway, Darwin Fisher at Insite, Heather Sivewright Parr, Kim Bondi, our principal, my students, and especially the 15 individuals who shared their narratives.
A Woman-centred Digital Literacy Resource for Adults Supporting Young Women

This is my real life. A lot of it is online. My friends, homework, news. It’s where I connect with what I love. But here is where it gets hard. When my ex threatens to share a private picture of me online if I don’t share more. When people say I should kill myself after talking about my depression openly online, or when someone posts that I’m not a real girl because I’m trans. When I get shamed for what I’m wearing, when someone says my skin is too dark…It hurts. Really bad. It makes me feel unsafe. This isn’t something I can ignore or brush off. It’s not just trolling or bullying or kids being kids. It’s violence and it’s not okay.
—Excerpt from YWCA Canada video on Cyberviolence

Gendered cyberviolence has great impact on the lives and mental health of young women and girls. With that in mind, YWCA Canada’s Project Shift: Creating a Safer Digital World for Young Women launched a series of resources to raise awareness and support youth and adults to better understand the issue. Earlier this year, YWCA Canada and MediaSmarts launched A Guide for Trusted Adults, a woman-centred digital literacy resource to help adults support girls and young women experiencing cyberviolence in a compassionate and non-judgemental way.

“YWCA Canada acknowledges that teachers are probably the most important adults in girls’ lives after parents, and in many cases, they are the most important source of information about online issues. Through consultation with youth across Canada, we know that youth are much less likely to turn to teachers for support though, largely because they feel that there’s little teachers can do to help them,” said Raine Liliefeldt, Director Member Services and Development of YWCA Canada.

The guide is a direct response to recommendations from girls and young women across the country who want the adults they trust to be more familiar with digital culture and ready to respond in a way that is supportive and non-shaming when they need to start a difficult conversation or report an incident of cyberviolence.

It includes practical advice that teachers can give to girls in many situations where classroom rules don’t apply. The online resource presents an overview of the challenges girls face online and what to do when they come for help with online interactions and relationships, sexting, blocking users, and reporting harassment. It includes plain language information on the laws related to cyberviolence, simple conversation starters for adults to build trust and learn about young women’s online lives, information on digital safety, and more.

To learn more about Project Shift, visit www.projectshift.ca/.

Resources
1 www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NzXHk2ruzE
2 www.ywcacanada.ca/data/documents/0000543.pdf
Will BC’s hungry kids finally receive the hearing and help they need?

For the first time in the past three decades, the issue of the ongoing and dramatic rise in the number of hungry kids in our schools will get a fair hearing. The ratification of the recent agreement between teachers and the province on moving forward with the issues emerging from the Supreme Court of Canada’s ruling on class size and composition holds out this promise.

Based on last year’s analysis by the province’s leading child advocacy coalition First Call, one in five kids are currently living below the poverty line in BC, which is a shocking total of 163,260 kids.

The problem is not just confined to Lower Mainland schools either, based on the following poverty rates in other locations: North Island (37%); Port Alberni and Duncan (30%); Prince Rupert (30%); and Central Coast Regional District (52%). Surrey, however, has a 21% poverty rate, and because it is the largest school district in BC with 71,000 students, it has a whopping 23,480 kids living in poverty.

While visiting Vancouver in February 2017, Canada’s UNICEF CEO David Morley was “shocked at the depth and extent of child poverty in a province as rich as BC.” The internationally known child advocate spoke at both Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia, and his candid analysis came as no surprise to local activists, as BC has the dubious distinction of leading Canada in child poverty for the past several years. The title of UNICEF’s report is “Fairness for Children: Canada’s Challenge.”

With the recent signing of the new provincial agreement which establishes a joint committee to hammer out the broader and more complex issues related to class composition, hungry kids will at last be on a provincial agenda, despite previous deferrals and repeated denials of their very existence.

Not once has the premier of this province or a single member of the BC Liberal Party referred publicly to the plight of BC’s hungry kids. It’s as if they don’t even exist.

The Liberal Party seems perfectly happy leaving the deepening and continuing problems of malnourished children to the generosity of strangers. Initiatives such as the Vancouver Sun’s Adopt–a–School program; private church, corporate, and individual citizen donations; and philanthropic contributions step into the breach to provide as much help as possible.

It must be noted that if the joint provincial committee can’t reach an agreement on class composition by the end of the upcoming school year, June 30, 2018, the matter will be referred to Arbitrator John Hall for binding arbitration by January 31, 2019.

Finally, the case for equality of educational opportunity and accessibility to an inclusive learning environment for our vulnerable and impoverished kids will be on an official agenda.

In his recent powerful Vancouver presentations, David Morley listed five impediments that leave our hungry kids in the lurch. They are:

1. daily symptoms of poor health
2. unhealthy eating habits
3. poor sleeping habits
4. feeling sick
5. being anxious. ☢️
Add to that list the following three observations of BC’s experienced front line inner-city teachers:
1. inability to focus
2. constant lethargy
3. lack of participation in classroom activities.

It’s a small wonder some of these kids are barely able to physically make it to school, let alone joining in the regular life and rhythm of our elementary and secondary classes. For many of them, our schools are safe, warm, and welcoming places.

The growth and development of these kids should not be dependent upon inadequate nutrition, “catch-as-catch-can initiatives,” and the generosity of private citizens. It’s time for the province to step up to the plate. As a society, we must begin to seriously examine the neglected status of disadvantaged children and dispel the studied silence surrounding the issue.

It’s time to right the wrongs these kids have endured for over three decades.

Noel Herron is a former Vancouver School Board trustee and author of *Every Kid Counts: a history of Vancouver’s inner city schools.* He has worked in inner-city schools for over 15 years, and has closely tracked the upsurge in child poverty since then.

### Building a More Just World Starts with an Economy that Works for Everyone

*by Anastasia Gaisenok, Executive Director at Check Your Head: The Global Youth Education Network*

Have you ever wondered what a truly just society looks like? You know, the kind where all humans are treated equally and have access to resources and opportunities to support themselves in a sustainable way while developing their full potential? Many of you probably have. So, what role does economy play in a society like that? For generations, we heard a neoliberal tale of “trickle-down economics” where growth lifts all the boats. Well, you can only ignore the inequities in wealth distribution for so long. At this point, even the T-Rex of global capitalism, the International Monetary Fund, admits that there is much more at play (Causes and Consequences of Income Inequality: A Global Perspective. IMF, June 15, 2015).

Another persistent tale that perpetuates the status quo is that of meritocracy: the idea that we live in a system that recognizes the merit of each individual as demonstrated through skills, abilities, and contribution, and rewards them economically for it. Like many ideas, it sounds great in theory, but in practice, it only makes sense if we all start from a level playing field. This is definitely not the case. A plethora of factors determine the range of possibilities within which a person can contribute to society, from biology to socialization and systemic discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, and class, among other things. The responsibility of overcoming the factors that put one at a disadvantage is placed squarely onto an individual (thanks again, neoliberalism), which is simply not fair. The bottom line is that if you are born into wealth, you have a higher chance of succeeding in pretty much everything in life, from academic achievement and career to better health and relationships. On top of that, if you are born into poverty, well, good luck mastering your life survival skills and jumping over all the fences. Thus, the cycle continues, leading to an ever-increasing polarization reinforced by the system set up to benefit the rich in the first place.

For the new generation, this reality is starting to hit home with a new force. We now live on a planet where the eight richest men in the world own as much wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity (Oxfam International, January 2017). In Canada, the wealth gap has been surging since the 1990s and continues to grow. Our beautiful province is home to some of the richest people in North America, and yet one-fifth of kids live in poverty (First Call BC).

Check Your Head started out in 1999 on the wave of the anti-globalization movement. The young activists organizing around
global trade agreements knew that those deals negotiated between the global elites are going to have a major impact on the economies, the environment, and the people around the world for generations to come. They also realized the importance of citizens holding governments and corporations accountable, and having a say in the process. Well, guess what? Almost two decades later, many of the social, environmental, and political problems we are facing today are directly and indirectly caused by economic globalisation fuelled by corporate greed and weak states. Meanwhile, the new agreements like Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) are still being negotiated as secretly as ever, and yet few people seem to be paying attention. In addition, BC is the only province in Canada without a poverty reduction plan.

This is why we have started a new multi-year initiative focused on economic justice. With the support from our community and labour partners, including the BCTF, we have revised some of our oldest workshops on these issues and are training teams of youth peer educators and organizers to bring these conversations into classrooms and communities. In the next few years, we will be focusing on creating spaces to critically examine the root causes of economic inequality, both locally and globally, and to explore existing solutions. The most exciting part? We will be offering the opportunity for young people to imagine an economically just society, and sharing the tools to build it. We invite you to join us on this journey.

Resources
• CYH Justice League website and blog (local youth-run resource on poverty and income inequality): www.cyhjusticeleague.wordpress.com
• Inequality.org (global): www.inequality.org
• The Inequality Project (global): www.theguardian.com/inequality
• Growing Gap Project (national): www.policyalternatives.ca/projects/growing-gap
• Trans-Pacific Partnership (national/global): www.canadians.org/tpp
• To book a workshop for your classroom visit our website, www.checkyourhead.org/workshops.
Asking students to sit and listen intently to speeches for an entire school day can be risky. What will they get out of it? On a recent Thursday, those of us at Prince Charles Secondary School found out, and for some of us, it turned into a life-changing experience.

Students were gathered in the auditorium, intently listening. One residential school survivor and two Holocaust survivors were the speakers at the Social Justice Symposium. Their names are Anne Jimmie, Robbie Waisman, and Julius Maslovat. They spoke of their experiences, all different, yet focused on the same theme: people being persecuted for their way of life and beliefs. By the end of the presentation, a line had formed to shake the speakers’ hands, and it was very long. Students wanted to have the privilege to personally thank them and maybe give them a hug.

A couple of weeks later, and kids are still talking about the event. The Social Justice Symposium informed students and staff about the horrors and injustices that occurred at residential schools and throughout the Holocaust. Although these events are not identical, they are both so dehumanizing and horrific that we must ensure they never happen again.

The unforgivable creation of residential schools led to Anne Jimmie being forced to attend one. Being only five years old at the time, she was told by her grandfather that she was going to school and that she would learn to read. Anne became very excited to be able to read to her grandfather. She was not told that she would not be going home, and wasn’t warned of all the abuse she would have to endure. Upon arrival, the people that she encountered frightened her; she didn’t know what they were saying, but she knew that when her parents left, the tone of their voices had changed. The suitcase and clothes that she brought with her were taken away, and she was left with a uniform. Anne cried herself to sleep that night. I remember my first day in Kindergarten was filled with feelings of excitement and nervousness, but friends were made fast, and I always had my twin brother, Caleb, by my side. We took for granted the privilege that we had to be able to live out our childhood and create memories that would build us up and add to the positivity in our lives. Times were simple and worry-free. All the while, we were unaware that not long ago, kids just as important and incredible with so much potential were trained and taught to be something they weren’t, told to relearn everything that they knew and to hate who they were, and to forget their values. Not long ago, Anne and many others’ lives were changed for the worse because people did not see the beauty in their culture, and instead decided that they were uncivilized and savages. Anne stayed at St. Eugene’s residential school for eight years. Each calendar year was a ten-month cycle spent at school and two months spent at home. Just try to imagine not being able to see your family or contact them. I can hardly fathom being struck whenever you spoke your native language, and being struck more if you started to cry. Anne said that she had to learn to not feel, to just bottle every emotion up so that she could get through the day. She learned to hate herself and to undervalue what she was taught by her family. After eight years of being sexually, emotionally, and physically abused by priests, nuns, and other kids, she turned to alcohol. There was no other way to cope. When I think of this, I cannot imagine not being able to think about my experiences because they were so debilitating. Anne had to learn to validate her feelings and recognize that what happened wasn’t her fault. She is now celebrating being 25 years sober, and spends her time with her family. All the wrongs have yet to be righted for the First Nations Peoples, and the most that we can do is promise to make a better future for all, and then put those promises into action for them to become valid.

To survive, you must have hope and something to live for. Robbie Waisman, a Holocaust survivor, kept the burning desire of being
reunited with his family to bring him hope and the will to endure the horrors of concentration camps. He was located at the Buchenwald concentration camp, was witness to countless awful sights, and lived through the harshest conditions.

At fourteen years old, Robbie had been to “hell and back” for over four years. Working in Germany’s ammunitions factories, perpetually starved, emotionally and physically exhausted, and deprived of all human emotion, he kept going. When asked in an interview some years ago as to how someone that young could be so strong, he answered, “Stupidity, the will to live, I don’t know. I just wanted to live. And I was lucky.” As a seventeen-year-old student, I do not think I would have been strong enough to want to live through all of these atrocities. If I had been separated from my loved ones, the uncertainty of them being alive or not would be too much. The sights around me would have overwhelmed me to no end, and I frankly think I would have gone insane. The enormity of the Holocaust was unknown until afterward. The amount of loss and devastation was crippling. Robbie lost his mother, father, four older brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins—all brutally murdered. He looks back on the fond memories he had as a small child with his family; these times didn’t last long, but they were sweet. He remembers his older brother Haim; he was an officer in the Polish army and was his James Bond, his 007. He was married to a beautiful girl named Golda. Robbie had a crush on Golda. “She was gorgeous. She had a ringlet on her forehead in the shape of a question mark flipped upside down.” Haim and Golda had a baby boy named Nathan. When she and her baby were sent off to a concentration camp, Golda could have worked, but refused to part with her baby. She and her baby were sent to the Treblinka gas chambers. Now, Robbie really focuses on his family. He said to go home after the presentation, hug your sibling or parent, and tell them that you love them. This would be an honour to him. Along with learning about the dehumanization of the concentration camps, Robbie taught us all to cherish what we have now. Tell whomever you love that you love them and take nothing for granted, because it all could be gone in an instant.

The story of Yidele Henechowicz was told by Julius Maslovat. Near the end of his story, he revealed that he was the little boy, Yidele, whose parents were killed all while trying to save his life. Julius spoke of a statistic: 1 in 5,000 children survived. I immediately put that into perspective and realized that it would mean one person in my immediate town would survive. While visiting Treblinka, the concentration camp where his mother died, it is traditional for Jewish people to leave a stone at the grave site, but Julius decided to leave a piece of one of his sculptures, a piece that his daughter and granddaughter had touched. He took a stone in remembrance of his mother. He was very young when he had to experience the Holocaust, and doesn’t remember much about his time and all that he saw. When asked about what he remembered, he had two memories. One memory came back to him while he was researching his life. He asked around about open cattle cars, and no one really knew what he was talking about. Why had it stuck out to him so much? He came to the conclusion that it was then that he had been separated from his father. Julius is very thankful for all the people who helped him throughout his time in concentration camps. There were a few people in each place who disregarded their own needs to help him and many other young children. But he owes the most gratitude towards his mother, who went against every maternal instinct and threw him, a small baby, over a fence to his father so that he would have a chance to live. What I learned from Julius is that it is my obligation to look after my neighbours, my friends, my family, but that it is also my privilege to do so. He now helps the less fortunate or those in need of help because he realizes how much it meant to him, so he wants to return the favour. Julius beautifully said, “What can you do? Remember that WWII did
As a former Vancouver School Board (VSB) drama teacher, and now the BC Regional Director of Educational Programs for the non-profit Fighting Antisemitism Together (FAST), I'm always looking for opportunities to expand our reach and create positive societal change through social justice education. At FAST, we aim to fight all forms of racism and foster inclusion with our free curriculum-based online resources. This year I wanted to do more, so I spearheaded Voices into Acting, a performance project using our free, online resource Voices into Action to inspire the script content. The initiative is meant for teachers who have always wanted to incorporate the performance arts into their classrooms, but are not comfortable doing so on their own.

This past school year, I was welcomed into Burnaby English teacher Pamela Smith’s school, Byrne Creek Secondary, to work on the initiative with her classes. The goal of Voices into Acting is to create and perform original theatre on the topic of discrimination. As Ms. Smith's classes are composed of diverse young people, with many newcomers who have recently arrived from war-torn countries, we decided to tread gently. We both agreed that students’ emotional and mental health should not be compromised. At the same time, we understood writing and theatre to be safe mediums in which to express painful life experiences.

Walking into the two Grade 10 classes, the students seemed receptive, so I shared the idea and timeline for the project with them; they would research historical events such as residential schools and the Holocaust never happen again. We look to the past to understand what went wrong and learn to take responsibility and move forward. We protest, vote, and stand up for our beliefs to ensure we aren’t the next victims. We look out for one another and do not allow the evil to return. Yet, horrid events like what’s going on in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, places in Africa, and so many others are taking place. And what are we doing? Questionable people are in power, and we put them there. When we have the privilege to vote, we waste it. The human voice is being drowned out by the higher ups and corruption. What we need to do is make people like Anne, Robbie, and Julius proud by not allowing this to continue to happen. The best form of respect we can show them is acting against evils such as these, so no one else has to live through what they did. To quote Robbie Waisman once again, “Never again. Noble, thought-provoking words, but only if we act on them; then words become meaningful.”

To quote Robbie Waisman, “Forgetting the Holocaust is every survivor’s greatest fear.” It is our job, as the next generation, to make sure that events such as residential schools and the Holocaust never happen again. We look to the past to understand what went wrong and learn to take responsibility and move forward. We protest, vote, and stand up for our beliefs to ensure we aren’t the next victims. We look out for one another and do not allow the evil to return. Yet, horrid events like what’s going on in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, places in Africa, and so many others are taking place. And what are we doing? Questionable people are in power, and we put them there. When we have the privilege to vote, we waste it. The human voice is being drowned out by the higher ups and corruption. What we need to do is make people like Anne, Robbie, and Julius proud by not allowing this to continue to happen. The best form of respect we can show them is acting against evils such as these, so no one else has to live through what they did. To quote Robbie Waisman once again, “Never again. Noble, thought-provoking words, but only if we act on them; then words become meaningful.”

Byrne Creek Community School students performed onstage to help bring awareness to the issue of racism.
oppression to fuel writing and performances on any social justice topic that interested them. At the thought of performing, students shook their heads in doubt, but I assured them that on performance day, they would be prepared. I also let them know that if they had never performed with a group before, they owed it to themselves to try it just this once!

Over the next few months, we broached dark moments in history like the Holocaust, the residential school system, gender inequality, Komagata Maru, and more. They were realizing how unfair and hurtful humans can be. It was dawning on them that, as the future generation, they could contribute to improving society. As we researched, discussed, and began the writing process, the students were clearly moved as they found their voices.

Some groups had trouble collaborating, which is part of any performance experience and one that they would have to work through (as I informed them). After all, we have to deal with many types of people throughout life, and collaboration is a useful skill to hone. Kinks were ironed out and their impassioned scripts were finalized, full of stories and spoken word like this one example from a refugee’s perspective:

You fear we are increasing taxes, you fear the loss of your culture, terrorism Your privileges are working against us

Finally, it was performance day. The theatre was packed, our sound and lighting were working, and the lights went up. These teenagers pulled through! As each class passionately delivered compelling works on social justice issues, the audience was moved. Finally, after facing their performance fears, the students took a final bow, visibly proud of themselves. Ms. Smith expressed her gratitude for having embarked on this project, stating, “As an English teacher with little knowledge of teaching acting for the stage, I felt supported and confident working alongside Jodi as my guide.”

After the shows, we celebrated our triumphant performances over pizza. Clearly, these two groups of teenagers were closer as a community. The arts really have the power to bring people together in a unique way. As we came to the end of our time together, I had each student express what their takeaways were. Many said that they did not think that they could act, but now that they had done it, they would do it again. Others said that the issues really made them think; they were different now, and would be more conscious of others moving forward. All of them were grateful for having pushed themselves to see this project to fruition.
Ms. Smith expressed, “Overall, it was an experience I would encourage teachers to engage in with their classes. It felt like a huge risk, but it met so many of the core competencies of the new English curriculum, and it was something my students benefitted from on so many levels. The public speaking skills they developed helped them build confidence and pride in themselves. The critical thinking that took place in order to choose their topics, and develop and rewrite their scripts, helped them become more aware of themselves as thinkers and writers, and of the world around them.”

It looks like our inaugural year for Voices into Acting was a success! I am very grateful to Ms. Smith and her students, who overcame fear and performance inexperience to share important messages with their community. Another excerpt from the show sums up their message:

_We take one glance and make a judgement to support our beliefs based on what society has taught us._

_Our discrimination is based on stereotypes that are accepted by society._

_Judging a person does not define who they are. It defines who you are. Discrimination. It stops with you._

If you wish to participate in this project next year, please contact me, Jodi, at jderkson@fastcyv.ca and visit www.voicesintoacting.ca for more details.

To read the Vancouver Sun’s article about Voices into Acting, visit vancouversun.com/news/local-news/children-use-drama-to-take-on-racism-in-burnaby.

_Passionate about Sexual Orientation-Gender Identity (SOGI) education? Become a SOGI School Lead for the 2017–18 school year._

The SOGI Educator Network enables educators to meet, share resources, co-design programs, and collectively overcome SOGI obstacles within and across districts. SOGI 123 supports LGBTQ-inclusive education by making everything from policy tips to lesson plans easy to access and easy to share. It’s about creating a community to support students.

Any BC educator can self-identify as a SOGI School Lead. School Leads raise awareness of SOGI within their schools by sharing, implementing, and developing SOGI-inclusive practices and initiatives. School Leads can be teachers, administrators, teacher-librarians, counsellors, or any other staff role in a school. Interested in becoming a SOGI Lead for your school? Express interest at www.sogieducation.org/network.
Imagine a time when books were banned from schools and elected school trustees encouraged angry parents to stage protests and witch hunts against teachers. Educators feared being inclusive when talking about same-sex families in their classrooms. Does this sound like something from a prehistoric era? Think again. Just 20 years ago, this was the bleak reality in Surrey, BC.

Early in my teaching career, I somewhat naively believed that teaching about same-sex families as part of the Kindergarten and Grade 1 curriculum shouldn’t be controversial. It was just part of my worldview about being inclusive when teaching about all family configurations. At that time, I saw this simply as a social justice issue that was no different from dealing with racism, sexism, ableism, or other forms of oppression in schools and society. Little did I know that my right-wing school board would elevate that to a protracted media circus and legal controversy that would last seven years and cost over one million dollars of taxpayers’ money to defend their narrow worldview.

Despite the fact that this legal challenge was jointly filed by Coquitlam teacher Murray Warren, his partner Peter Cook, myself, Dianne Willcott (a parent from my classroom), and a secondary school student, the media chose to focus on me as a gay Kindergarten teacher in Surrey fighting against a Fundamentalist Christian school board. It got quite ugly during those years with parents from other schools picketing outside my school, parents from my classroom being called “faggot lovers,” unsuccessful attempts by picketers to have parents remove their children from my classroom, hateful letters in the local newspapers, and ultimately death threats. I always kept my cool, knowing that as educators we are always held to a high standard as role models in society. At times, I was required to use the grievance process to protect myself from harassment from other employees.

During this time, foes of equality brought up arguments that reading books about same-sex families during a unit on families would confuse children about gender and psychologically harm them. They argued that it would deny parents the right to raise their children as they saw fit according to their own religious and/or cultural values. They further argued that any mention of LGBTQ issues was best dealt with at ages 15 or 16 and no younger, as it was not “age appropriate” for younger students.

Teacher-librarians and the BCTF proved to be outstanding allies in this fight against censorship over the years. BCTF locals and teachers gave generously to the fundraising campaign for us as the petitioners in this precedent-setting case. Courageous Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers in different school districts read these books in their classrooms and were instrumental in filing affidavits in the courts that resulted in an eventual win by a decisive seven-to-two margin at the Supreme Court of Canada.

Surrey has since evolved from the dark ages. They are one of 45 districts with a discrete LGBTQ policy, which supports the teaching of LGBTQ issues in classrooms and protects teachers in doing so. With the recent ministerial order requiring all school boards to have LGBTQ policies by the end of 2016–17, we will never have a controversy like this again. We still have a long way to go to end homophobia and transphobia in schools, but this court case successfully prevented other school boards from trying to follow suit. It was certainly an interesting time in our history as educators in the public school system.

James Chamberlain is Vice-Principal at Lord Roberts Elementary in Vancouver. Last year, his school held a Pride Week which was profiled in the Fall/Winter 2016 Social Justice Newsletter.
“In the future, there will be no female leaders, there will just be leaders,” says Sheryl Sandberg. But it’s not the future. It’s 2017, and right now there are not enough female leaders in Canadian politics, and it’s a problem. For International Women’s Day this past March, the Canadian Teachers’ Federation and Equal Voice, a national, multi-partisan Canadian organization dedicated to electing more women to political office, hosted a Daughters of the Vote initiative to encourage women from across the country to participate in political decision-making. The event invited 338 women from a diversity of backgrounds to take their seat in the House of Commons. Accompanying these young women were 40 teachers from across Canada to help facilitate workshops and conferences in and around Parliament Hill. The event aimed to inspire more women to participate in the political sphere and provide them the opportunity to voice their concerns to political decision makers.

From Trudeau to Mulcair and Ambrose to Ouellette, everyone was present while the women took up their seats in a full house and passionately voiced their concerns about issues facing all Canadians. Topics raised by the women ranged from domestic violence issues as voiced by Gunisha Kaila from Surrey, to Trina Qaqqaq, an Inuk woman from Nunavut, bringing forth the unacceptably high rates of Aboriginal youth suicide. Prime Minister Trudeau welcomed the young women to the house with encouraging words, but they did not shy away from the real issues impacting our country. In fact, it wasn’t just in the House that the women were voicing their concerns and those of their communities. Throughout the week, the women had the opportunity to discuss issues with the Minister of Status of Women Maryam Monsef, as well as the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Catherine McKenna. The young women unapologetically argued for action on the missing and murdered Aboriginal women inquiry and the Keystone Pipeline, demanding accountability from the ministers. It quickly became apparent that these women were passionate about contributing to solving the multitude of issues plaguing communities across our country. Yet, women continue to be underrepresented in the political realm in Canada. From political systems to institutional barriers, culture to public opinion, why might this be?

The headline of a recent Huffington Post article addressing Prime Minister Trudeau’s push towards gender parity in cabinet stated, “Gender Parity in Government Starts with Getting Women into Politics,” (Francis, 2016). When asked to explain why gender parity was a concern to him, Trudeau simply answered, “Because it’s 2015.” But what does that mean today? Despite the United Nations’ recommendation that a country have a minimum of 30% women in elected positions to ensure that public policy reflects the needs of women, only 26% of the Members of Parliament (MPs) in Canada’s House of Commons are women, the majority of whom are Caucasian women at that. This pales in comparison to numerous countries, including Rwanda, whose parliament has 64% female representation, and Bolivia at 53% (World Bank, 2016). It also represents a democratic deficit, which highlights how Canadians, of which 50.4% are female, are not being equitably represented in our government.

A February National Post article titled, “Sorry, Canada, when it...”
comes to political leadership it turns out you’re not uniquely feminist,” expressed that age and education levels do not play a role in whether women will be perceived by voters as qualified to serve in political leadership positions (Glavin, 2017). Yet, young women are striving to achieve higher levels of education in order to prove their merit and avoid gender-based discrimination that runs rampant through the political realm (Quinn, 2017). However, by the time these credentials are achieved, many women may be starting to think about having families, which comes with the additional responsibilities of daycare, housework, and more. While Trudeau may point to the year 2015 as being a time for change, not everyone has access to the one-to-three nannies employed by the Trudeau family (and potentially taxpayers) to help with the daily domestic responsibilities faced by the typical Canadian family (CBC, 2016). Subsequently, women continue to be “disproportionally responsible for unpaid labour and childcare… in addition to the gendered wage gap” that continues to exist. Many organizations, privately and in the political realm, fail to address these very real life circumstances adequately (Quinn, 2017).

In addition, the political realm is plagued with unacceptably high levels of cyberbullying and harassment. CBC On the Coast journalist Stephen Quinn pointed to the increasing harassment, both cyber and otherwise, that “men are simply not subject to” as a deterrent for women entering politics (2017). Equal Voice Executive Director Nancy Peckford concurred with this idea, noting the recent cyberbullying cases on Parliament Hill that resulted in Alberta NDP MLA Sandra Jansen crossing the floor and reading aloud some of the abhorrent statements made about her online, calling her a
“traitorous bitch,” and arguing that she should “stay in the kitchen where she belongs” (Anderson, 2016). While Trudeau maintains that it’s the 21st century and fundamental change is occurring, this kind of misogynistic behavior, online bullying, and harassment continues to be encountered by “the vast majority of elected women…on a fairly regular basis” (Anderson 2016). Similarly, Conservative MP Michelle Rempel expressed that the sexism she faces daily arises from not “automatically complying with someone’s request or capitulating on [her] position on an issue,” which in and of itself runs counter to the fundamental tenets of democracy which are to peacefully debate issues from different perspectives (Anderson, 2016). Such attacks against women, which often cross the line into sexualized violence, are thought to “scare off more women” from entering the political realm where this attitude and type of language both diminishes women’s contributions to public life and serves to “undermine the confidence and leadership that female elected officials are offering” (Anderson, 2016). Subsequently, women are seeking employment in fields outside the political realm in which they feel they can also make a difference, but not be subject to the kind of harassment existing in politics.

However, it is imperative to our societies and communities that women participate in the political and civic realm. When female leaders are elected, time and again resources are allocated more fairly and distributed more equally. Policymaking that drives structural policies in industries from natural resources to banking are more fairly negotiated for, and the national GDP, the general health of a country’s economy, improves (Young, 2016). However, old democracies like Canada don’t seem to favour equal representation. Rather, countries that have experienced recent conflict or are new democracies tend to have a higher proportion of women in Parliament (Smith, 2017). Why is this?

An Environics Communications and Analytics survey recently found that Canadians score far below citizens of Latin America, Southern Europe, and large parts of East Asia and Africa in agreeing that women are equally as qualified as men to hold political leadership positions (Global Attitudes, 2017). Strangely, these countries are traditionally more patriarchal societies than North America and Western Europe in which feminist values are strongest (Global Attitudes, 2017). On the bright side, there is a growing trend that suggests globally people believe that women are qualified and capable of political leadership. So, what’s wrong with Canada? Megan Hooft, Deputy Director of Canada Without Poverty, argues that “for Canada to say we are a leader on gender equality is one thing, but to act like a leader is something else entirely” (Smith, 2017). Political scientists from across the country are pointing to the need for electoral reform through proportional representation, which would allow parties to ensure gender equality in government (Why the Parliamentary Gender Gap, 2015).

Subsequently, if the 20th century witnessed the Women’s Suffrage Movement, then the 21st century must witness an increased participation of women in political leadership positions. It’s clear that when more women participate in the political realm in Canada, our GDP is higher and our country produces better policies, programs, and operations, specifically in national security, international relations, human resources,
and the fisheries, environment, science, banking and automotive industries (Morris, 2016). If we hope to maintain our status as a global leader, a country that others look to as a guide for everything from public services to peacekeeping, then we need more women, and a diversity of women, in political leadership. Maybe next time a Women's March happens we would see a little more of this, or better yet, maybe we wouldn't need to march—again.

References


BC Supreme Court Cases and the FLDS Community in Bountiful, BC

by Kristin Quigley, Status of Women Action Group, CASJ

Persistent questions about the polygamous lifestyle practiced by the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) members living in the community of Bountiful have remained unanswered for decades. Located in southeastern BC, this branch of the FLDS dictates that devout FLDS males marry at least three wives. The women forced into these “celestial marriages” and their children are physically and socially isolated. Arguably, they are among one of the most vulnerable groups of British Columbians. Recently, some of the glaring inequities resulting from these polygamous marriages were raised in the Supreme Court of BC. Since August 2016, there have been two separate trials involving prominent, long-standing members of Bountiful’s FLDS religious community.

Last fall, Brandon James Blackmore, James Marion Oler, and Emily Gail Crossfield Blackmore were tried for removing and transporting a Canadian child for sexual purposes. In 2004, these three adults were accused of taking a 13-year-old girl from her home in Bountiful and driving her to Utah so that she could marry Warren Jeffs, the prophet of the FLDS in the United States at that time. It is worth noting that Jeffs has since been convicted of sexual assault, and he is currently serving a life sentence for pedophilia in an American prison. With regard to the recent trial in BC, a decision was announced by the Supreme Court Justice Paul Pearlman on February 13, 2017. Two of the accused, Brandon Blackmore and Emily Gail Crossfield Blackmore, stand convicted of this trafficking crime. Their conviction is noteworthy since it is rare in Canada that offenders have been successfully prosecuted for this offence.

During this trial, Rebecca Musser, a former FLDS member, described her experience as a 19-year-old bride forced into a polygamous marriage. Her first husband was the American FLDS prophet Rulon Jeffs, who was eighty-six years old at that time. Following his death, Musser told the court she was required to be “reassigned” or married to another FLDS male. Faced with this prospect, she fled from her…

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From www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/women-politics/.
community rather than endure another polygamous union. She spoke about the treatment of women within the FLDS community, stating, “…a wife was expected to obey her husband completely and had no right to resist if he wanted to do something to her body” (Globe and Mail, February 13, 2017).

A second Supreme Court of BC trial involving devout members of the Bountiful community, presided over by Justice Sheri Ann Donegan, began in the middle of April 2017. At the heart of this trial are the issues relating to the numerous polygamous marriages entered into by two of Bountiful’s former bishops, Winston Kaye Blackmore and James Marion Oler. While Oler has four wives, W. Blackmore has married more than 20 women since 1990. W. Blackmore is familiar with this legal process, as he was brought before the court on charges relating to polygamy in both 2004 and 2009. Both of W. Blackmore’s previous trials resulted in charges that were stayed. This time he was not able to have the charges dismissed, and the current trial proceeded during the latter half of April, concluding on May 5, 2017. We await the court’s decision with interest.

In court, W. Blackmore argued that he is entitled to practice his religion under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. A former bishop who was excommunicated from the FLDS community in 2002 by Warren Jeffs, he explained the importance of plural or “celestial” marriages; an FLDS male must marry at least three wives to achieve their ultimate goal, acceptance into heaven. Since 1990, W. Blackmore has married at least 24 women, fathering nearly 150 children. Thus, his efforts to meet this spiritual challenge have gone undeterred, and it is evident that he has enjoyed those religious freedoms enshrined in the Constitution of Canada.

One wonders, however, about the rights and freedoms of W. Blackmore’s many brides. Within the context of our larger Canadian society, who is protecting his wives and their children by ensuring their rights to be free from neglect, harm, or sexual assault? What about their right to have access to basic necessities for life, healthcare, and an education? Reflecting on other testimony offered by Rebecca Musser’s testimony during the 2016 fall trial, she points out that many moral and legal dilemmas are posed by the religious practices used by this FLDS sect. She, for one, hopes the upcoming court ruling will deter any community from “propagating criminal activity under the guise of God, religion, and religious freedom.” I agree. The court now has a pivotal opportunity to take action that recognizes and upholds the human rights of everyone living in the Bountiful FLDS community, not just a very few privileged elders.

References
Teachers Can—and Must—Be Climate Change Heroes for their Students

by Julie Johnston, Environmental Justice Action Group, CASJ

Let’s face it, teachers probably don’t go into education because of a hero complex. We become teachers because we are fond of working with young people, we want to share the passion we have for our subject, or we like helping others. But with the current climate crisis, I feel we must become climate change heroes for our students.

Our education system has pretty much been mute on the climate change crisis. Like much of the general population, we have been hoping it would go away, wanting to believe it’s not as bad as those scientists and activists say it is. Climate change deniers have fought harder to safeguard the future of fossil fuel profits than we have fought to safeguard the future. Many of us have been too busy or not scientifically literate enough to uncover the truth on our own.

The truth is that after decades of delay and inaction, climate change is now an emergency. We are swiftly foreclosing on our students’ futures, and possibly the survival of future generations. Climate disruption is impacting millions of people around the world. They are losing their lives or their livelihoods, their food security and water sources, and their homes and entire homelands. Greenhouse gas pollution (excessive carbon dioxide and other long-lived greenhouse gases such as methane and nitrous oxide) is causing global warming and climate chaos, leading to extreme heatwaves, droughts, floods, wildfires, and ocean heating and acidification. These events threaten the very viability of our entire biosphere.

Yet the atmosphere in our schools hasn’t changed much at all. Imagine the cognitive dissonance our students must be experiencing when we teach as if...
climate change isn’t happening. They live in a zeitgeist of actual doom and gloom, but witness no sense of urgency—or even advocacy—within the institutions that purport to have their best interests at heart.

Although we have overhauled the curriculum, the best our students get is a mention of “contributing to community and caring for the environment” under the Personal and Social Responsibility competency. But why are we downloading that onto them? Why are we—their teachers and other educators—not demonstrating that competency more ourselves? Why are we not “caring for the environment” more by taking a courageous stand for urgent climate change action on behalf of our students? Why aren’t more of us serving as examples? Why do teachers who give a darn about this—the greatest sustainability and social justice issue of all time—still get tuned out in the staffroom?

The Burning Age is over and, as they say, the Stone Age didn’t end because they ran out of stones. The whole world needs to rapidly make the switch away from fossil fuels to a zero-carbon (non-burning) economy and way of living. We need to call for a price on carbon, the full internalization of the public health and environmental costs of burning fossil fuels, and an end to direct and indirect government subsidies to fossil fuel corporations. We need to make a commitment to a just transition to green jobs.

As teachers, we can call for energy audits of every school, encourage cafeterias to serve foods lower on the food chain, facilitate carpooling and better uptake of public transit, and teach about climate change and sustainability issues in age-appropriate ways.

It’s going to take courage, compassion, imagination, and political will, but we do have influence. We need to stop being hesitant about this awesomely exciting transition. It’s time to stand up and advocate for a fossil-fuel-free world—one that will be safer, cleaner, healthier, more equitable, and more peaceful. Let’s all become climate change heroes for all children and for all species.

For resources on climate change, please check out the Environmental Justice Action Group page: bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=22000&libID=21990.
Invitation to Attend

Early Bird Registration Deadline May 31, 2017

Plenary Speakers

David Suzuki
David Suzuki Foundation, Canada

Wade Davis
University of British Columbia, Canada

Elizabeth May
Green Party of Canada, Canada

Gujaaw
Council of the Haida Nation, Canada

Jeannette Armstrong
University of British Columbia, Canada

Tara Cullis
David Suzuki Foundation, Canada

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2017–18 Committee for Action on Social Justice (CASJ)

- advises the BCTF on social justice issues
- reviews and promotes social justice workshops
- liaises with community groups and NGOs
- develops policy on emerging issues
- reviews and develops materials for classroom teachers
- develops and supports networks of social justice contacts in the following action group areas: Antiracism, Antipoverty, Status of Women, LGBTQ, Peace and Global Education, Environmental Justice
- co-ordinates the work of the six action groups.

Antiracism Action Group

Maryam Adrangi
Nimfa Casson
Ryan Cho
Linda Frank

Workshops
- A Place for Everyone: Equity and inclusion in your local, classroom, and school
- Antidiscrimination Response Training
- Bafa Bafa Rafa Rafa
- Incorporating Antiracist Education into BC’s Revised Curriculum.

Status of Women Action Group

Laura Lafortune
Sheena Seymour
Sonja van der Putten

Workshops
- Assertive Communication
- Building Healthy Youth Relationships
- Stamping Out Cyberbullying.

Antipoverty Action Group

Leon D’Souza
Davida Marsden
Annie Ohana
Kati Spencer

Workshops
- Poverty as a Classroom Issue
- You Can Make a Difference to People Living in Poverty.

Environmental Justice Action Group

Sue Ghattas
Julie Johnston
Heather Kelley
Sarah Newton

Workshops

Peace and Global Education Action Group

Shannon Moore
Katherine O’Connor
Deidre Torrence

Workshops
- Bringing Global Education into Your Classroom
- Creating Cultures of Peace
- Strategies for Discussing Controversial Issues

LGBTQ Action Group

Heather McDonald
Lizzie Midyette
Sean Moores
Nichelle Penney

Workshops
- Creating a Gender-Inclusive School Culture
- Reach Out, Speak Out on Homophobia and Transphobia
- Sexual Health Education Part One: One Size Fits All?
- Sexual Health Education Part Two: Sex, Sex, Sex!

Important SJ dates to celebrate

- Sept 21: UN International Day of Peace
- Sept 30: Orange Shirt Day
- Oct 16: World Food Day
- Nov 25: 16 Days of Action begins
- Nov 25: International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women
- Dec 10: Human Rights Day

Please note: The BCTF is not responsible for the content or links found on any external website. Opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the author.
The life of a child in a BC Indian Residential School

Gladys We Never Knew

The life of a child in a BC Indian Residential School

A teaching resource for intermediate students is now available as an ebook here: bctf.ca/GladysWeNeverKnew/.

This is intended to be an interactive resource leading educators from the story to the backstory. Like Project of Heart, this resource has many links to related films, videos, documents, articles, activities, and more when you click on the tiles throughout the book.

Visit bctf.ca/HiddenHistory.

Secondary resources available soon.

More Aboriginal Education Resources available here:

bctf.ca/AboriginalEducation.aspx