Student Articles

Each issue of ***Building Bridges*** includes:

1) a PDF file (the complete document) **and**

2) a Word file that contains **only** the articles and questions. This file does **not** contain an Answer Key.

This **Word** file allows students to complete assignments using a computer either at school or at home. Teachers can assign all or parts of the file by email attachment or a school website. The **Word** file also allows teachers to:

• easily modify and format content including changing fonts and text sizes

• create a PDF document and use Adobe Reader's 'Read Out Loud Mode'

• save paper and copying costs and help protect the environment

• promote and encourage students’ computer skills

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See: [www.libreoffice.org/discover/libreoffice/](http://www.libreoffice.org/discover/libreoffice/) [www.openoffice.org](http://www.openoffice.org)

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**A Trip To The Bank Gone Wrong**



Most people don’t think twice about a trip to the bank. But a few years ago, this everyday task turned into a nightmare for Maxwell Johnson and his
12-year-old granddaughter, Torianne.

The Johnsons are members of the Heiltsuk Nation. On December 20, 2019, they visited a Bank of Montreal (BMO) branch in Vancouver. They were there to open Torianne’s first bank account. But when they presented their government-issued **status cards**, the employee took their cards and other forms of identification (ID) and left them waiting.

The Johnsons’ ID was passed on to the bank manager, who called 911. The manager was concerned that the ID was fake. He was also suspicious of a large amount of money in Mr. Johnson’s account. He identified the pair as “suspects”.

When the Johnsons were called upstairs to get their ID, they were met by the police, who arrested and handcuffed them.

Eventually, the police confirmed that the Johnsons’ ID was **legitimate**. As for the money in Mr. Johnson’s account? He had received it from the government as part of an **Aboriginal rights settlement package**.

No crime had been committed, and the Johnsons were released. But it was clear to Mr. Johnson that he and his granddaughter had been racially **profiled**. He told CBC about the experience.

“They came over and grabbed me and my granddaughter, took us to a police vehicle and handcuffed both of us, told us we were being detained and read us our rights.”

The most heartbreaking part was seeing his granddaughter handcuffed and crying.

“You can see how scared she was… It was really hard to see that. I keep seeing my granddaughter standing on that street crying while she’s being handcuffed. I don’t think any parent or grandparent would ever want to see that in their lifetime. She must have been about 20 to 30 feet away from me and all I could do was just stand and not do [sic] anything,” said Mr. Johnson.

**BMO responds**

In the aftermath of the event,
BMO agreed to provide **cultural competency** **training** for its senior staff. It also pledged to provide a course on **Indigenous** culture for all employees. In addition, it put artwork created by Mr. Johnson on display at five of its branches in B.C. The artwork depicts a human face above the bank’s logo. It symbolizes forgiveness.

“The human represents our culture,” Mr. Johnson told CBC News. “We are told that when we go through trauma we are never alone, our ancestors walk alongside us.”

In March 2020, the bank also flew 15 representatives to the Heiltsuk community of Bella Bella, a remote town on B.C.’s Central Coast. They participated as witnesses in a washing ceremony. The purpose of the ceremony was to help the Johnsons and the rest of the community begin to heal.

Heiltsuk Hereditary Chief Gary Housty told CBC News that the ceremony was a positive experience.

“I think it was really good. I feel that there [sic] were strong words said that probably had to be said and I’m really hoping that the people from the Bank of Montreal heard it and learned from it,” the Chief stated.

**Settlement with the Vancouver Police Board**

In September 2022, the Johnsons also reached a settlement with the Vancouver Police Board.

The board agreed to a number of measures. It would pay an undisclosed amount of money to the Johnson family for damages caused by “injury to dignity.” It also admitted that the officers who had handcuffed the Johnsons had discriminated against them because they are Indigenous. It suspended the arresting officers.

In addition, the police board paid $100,000 to the Heiltsuk First Nation’s **restorative justice** department. It also funded a
year-long community program for at-risk young women. Finally, the board agreed to create a position for an anti-Indigenous-racism officer. The officer would review complaints related to Indigenous people.

“It is our sincere goal to create a more meaningful relationship with Indigenous communities, and we believe the terms of this settlement will go a long way in furthering this goal,” the police board said in a statement.

The Vancouver Police Board also agreed to participate in a trauma-healing ceremony in Bella Bella in November 2022. A delegation of about 20 board members attended, but the two officers who arrested the Johnsons were not among them. As a result, Mr. Johnson said that he, his family, and his community could not fully heal. He asked the officers to come to the community later for an apology ceremony so the healing circle could be complete.

“If you could give them the message,” Mr. Johnson said. “It’s all about forgiveness for us. I really, really did wish they could come so we could all have closure.”

**Next steps**

However, this request went unaddressed. So, in December 2023, Maxwell Johnson asked the B.C. police complaint commissioner to reopen the case. He wanted the commissioner to require the arresting officers to attend a second **reparation** ceremony in Bella Bella.

“The Vancouver Police Board is supposed to be working with us to address systemic racism, but the ongoing failure of their constables to respect Heiltsuk legal traditions and culture, and to apologize in an appropriate way, is systemic racism in action. A Heiltsuk apology ceremony, attended by the constables, would be a positive, uplifting and healing experience for everyone involved. It would be **reconciliation** in action,” Marilyn Slett explained in a statement after the 2022 ceremony. She is the Heiltsuk Elected Chief.

Torianne also hopes for closure. She told CBC News that the impact of events like these can be deep and long-lasting. That’s why speaking up in the face of discrimination is important.

“I’m still healing from that day. I want to tell everyone that Indigenous people experience discrimination, including children like me... that feeling of being unwelcomed can stay with us our whole lives. I also want to tell everyone, especially Indigenous kids, to be strong and speak out when they face discrimination. I hope my grandfather and I helped you feel like you can speak up and be heard when you experience injustice.”

**Aboriginal rights settlement package:** $75-million settlement package paid to the Heiltsuk Nation in 2019 by the federal government after a court case found that the Heiltsuk people had the Aboriginal right to commercially harvest herring spawn on kelp. Mr. Johnson and every Bella Bella member received about $30,000 in compensation.

**cultural competency training:** a structured education program designed to improve a person’s understanding and sensitivity towards diverse cultures. The main objective is to give learners the knowledge to interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds in an empathetic and respectful manner.

**Indigenous:** of or referring to an original inhabitant of the land that is now Canada: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people

**legitimate:** legal; valid

**profiled:** suspected of doing something wrong or being targeted because of certain visible characteristics such as race

**reconciliation:** the reestablishment of a broken relationship

**reparation:** the act of making amends for a mistake or injury

**restorative justice:** a way of addressing conflict and crime that enables the person who caused the harm, people who were affected by the harm, and the community to create a meaningful solution. Unlike the traditional justice system in Canada which seeks to establish a punishment for each act of wrongdoing, restorative justice focuses on repairing damage and restoring relationships.

**status cards:** government ID that identifies someone as a status Indian, as defined by the federal Indian Act. The cards have been a valid piece of identification in Canada for the last 64 years.

**Unpacking Systemic Racism**

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Systemic racism. You’ve probably heard this term before. What does it mean? What does it look like?

Racism is an attitude or behaviour. It unfairly discriminates against other people based on their race, or ethnic background. Sometimes it also spreads hatred about people based on their race.

Systemic racism is racism that, over time, has been built into our **institutions**, **policies**, procedures, and laws. It is the reason why society is stacked against certain people — especially
non-whites — simply due to the colour of their skin.

These people may have many talents and strengths. Yet systemic barriers make it very hard for them to succeed. How? By making it harder for them to find a job. To get a loan. To start a business. Or to get into post‑secondary education.

Because of systemic racism, on average, people with black or brown skin earn less money than people with white skin. They also achieve, on average, a lower level of education. They often have poorer health outcomes. And many experience more violence in their lives.

Systemic racism is not always obvious. People can participate in systemic racism without knowing it. They may be unaware that an accepted way of doing things discriminates against certain groups of people. They may not realize that certain practices are responsible for creating inequality.

**Digging down to the roots**

Systemic racism is rooted in historical events. In Canada, systemic racism began with British **colonialism**.

When the British settled in the ‘New World’, they believed they were bringing civilization and religion to the **Indigenous Peoples** who had lived there since **time immemorial**. They believed that Indigenous cultures were inferior. They believed that Indigenous populations needed to be changed and controlled, or wiped out.

These beliefs were reflected in the laws the colonial government **imposed**. Today, it’s clear that the 1876 **Indian Act** laid the framework for the systemic racism that Indigenous people have experienced ever since.

Black Canadians, too, can find the roots of today’s systemic racism in history. For two centuries, Canada practiced slavery against Blacks. In 1884, slavery was officially banned in the British colonies. However, discrimination against Black populations continued after that in the form of **segregation**.

People of Asian descent in Canada have experienced racism for many years, too. In the early 1880s, the federal government brought in 17,000 Chinese workers to help build the Canadian Pacific Railway. Then, in 1885,when the railroad had been built, the Canadian government introduced a Chinese head tax. The tax applied only to Chinese immigrants. It was brought in to discourage further immigration. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923 cut off Chinese immigration altogether.

Later, during the Second World War, the Canadian government forced 20,000 people of Japanese descent into **internment camps**. Some 75 percent of these people were Canadian citizens.

“Canada’s racism, both past and present, is a well-**documented** and **undeniable** fact,” writes Mark O’Neil, president of the Canadian Museum of History and the Canadian War Museum.

“But many Canadians, sadly, do not know their history, so it stands to reason that they don’t know the darker chapters of it.”

**Systemic racism in
Canada today**

Over the years, Canada has worked hard to reduce systemic racism.

The country has made progress. For instance, the federal government has publicly apologized for some of Canada’s more harmful past human rights abuses. As well, many Canadians today are proud of our **multicultural** country. And our 1982 Canadian **Charter of Rights and Freedoms** shows that Canada rejects racism. It states that everyone must be treated with the same respect, dignity, and consideration.

Yet when you look at the data, there is still troubling evidence of systemic racism in Canada.

One example? The average income of Indigenous and Black Canadians is about 25 percent less than that of other Canadians.

Another example? Black and Indigenous Canadians were **disproportionately** impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Why? They often work in front‑line health care and service jobs. They frequently ride public transit. They usually live in more crowded conditions, which made physical distancing challenging. They are more likely to have underlying health conditions.

Also, Black and Indigenous people are **overrepresented** in prisons and jails across the country. The **incarceration** **rate** of Black Canadians is about three times higher than the rate for the Canadian population as a whole. Meanwhile, Indigenous people make up 30.4 percent of Canada’s federal inmates. Yet they account for just three percent of this country’s adult population.

Studies have shown that police forces use disproportionate violence against Black and Indigenous people. **Carding** affects a higher percentage of
non-white Canadians, too.

“My clients get stopped and searched by police for things that I would never be given a second glance for,” says Alberta criminal defence lawyer Meryl Friedland, who is white. “I have no safety concerns when I get stopped for speeding; my clients can’t always say the same.”

**‘People like us’ – implicit bias and privilege**

A University of Toronto study published in 2016 looked at “resumé whitening”.

For the study, Black and Asian people hunting for jobs were told to “whiten” their resumes. They changed their last names so they did not sound ethnic. They also deleted any mention of extracurricular activities that might be associated with Black or Asian people. What did the study find? Blacks with “whitened” resumes were 2.5 times more likely to be given interviews than other Black job hunters. Asian applicants were also much more likely to be chosen if they “whitened” their resumes.

Implicit bias is the reason for these results, says lawyer Darren Thorne. Implicit bias is the preference people have to be around other people they feel they can relate to. Implicit bias is natural. But over time, implicit bias unfairly excludes certain groups.

**Privilege** also plays a role in systemic racism. Those with greater privilege are more likely to get ahead.

What do privileged people have in common? They are likely to be white. To live in safer neighbourhoods. To attend good schools. To have access to good health care. They are more likely to have parents who are well‑educated and have the money to pay for sports programs, music lessons, or college tuition. They have easier access to role models and mentors who look like them.

Canada is a much more **inclusive** society than it used to be. Yet the people in power are still mainly white. For example, Canada has 338 Members of Parliament (MPs). Currently, 11 MPs are Indigenous. Nine are Black.

Matthew Green is one of the Black MPs. He vividly remembers being nine years old and seeing Canada’s first-ever Black MP, Lincoln Alexander, on stage. He said Alexander’s “dignity... grace and an authority” made a strong impression on him. The event spurred his interest in politics.

Young Canadians need to see role models that look like them. They need to believe it’s possible that they could one day follow in their steps.

“If you can’t see it, you can’t be it,” Mr. Green says.

Of course, it’s possible to come from an underprivileged background and to succeed. Many notable Canadians have. But it’s harder. And even when they become successful, they still bump up against systemic racism.

Brooks Arcand-Paul is a respected Alberta lawyer and MLA. He identifies as Cree. He grew up on the Alexander First Nation in Treaty Six territory. Despite his position, he has himself has been pulled over and questioned multiple times by the police because he is Indigenous.

Lori Anne Thomas is a Black criminal lawyer who was recently appointed to the Ontario Court of Justice. She has been told by court staff move out of the area of the courtroom reserved for lawyers – even though she is one.

“I’ve heard more than enough times, ‘You don’t look like a lawyer.’ I know exactly what that means, which is that I’m not a tall, white man,” says Ms. Thomas.

“It hits at you,” she says, to be “constantly reminded that you’re kind of not expected to be here.”

**A more equal, more inclusive, more just society**

How can we end systemic racism? Understanding the issue is a good place to start.

We can acknowledge that systemic racism exists. We can learn to recognize it. We can learn about our country’s history. We can discover how racism has become **entrenched** in our institutions. We can reflect on the biases we may not even be aware that we hold. And we can think about the role we play in making it possible for social injustices to continue.

Acknowledging the existence of system racism in Canada does not mean we are attacking our country, our identity, or our values.

“Grappling with such truths is not somehow unpatriotic,” says Mr. Thorne. “It is a sign of a mature society — one honest enough to recognize when it falls short of its values and that believes in those values enough to at least try to live up to them.”

“At the end of the day, there’s going to be some difficult conversations,” says Mr. Arcand‑Paul.

**Canada’s Anti-Racism Strategy**

In 2019, the federal government unveiled its Anti-Racism Strategy. The strategy was formed after months of cross-country meetings with Canadians who have experienced racism and discrimination.

One program that has resulted from this new strategy was launched in 2021. It is designed to help Black **entrepreneurs** get business loans. The head of the Black Business and Professional Association called this a “game changer”.

“Systemic racism, that is the biggest factor when we walk into a bank,” says Nadine Spencer. “I always say that the biggest challenge Black business owners face is that they are black.”

**Racism and Self-Worth**

Brandon Yan is a **biracial** Canadian. He has a Chinese dad. As a teen, he tried to fit in.

“I used to imagine myself with a different nose or with different eyes. I even used to imagine what it would be like to have a different dad — a dad who looked like other dads.”

He started using a non-Chinese name on resumés. He found that helped him get job interviews.

“Life rewarded me for erasing my Chineseness,” Mr. Yan said.

Mr. Yan came to understand that racism impacts how you feel about who you are. As a Black, Indigenous, or Asian person, you start to doubt your self-worth.

“Growing up in a white suburb, I saw myself through the lens of whiteness and **aspired** to it,” says. “And here’s the thing. I don’t think anyone ever told me to be ashamed of being half-Chinese or mixed race. [Racism and white supremacy] exist as normal and as abundant as the air that I breathed. It was on the TV. It was on the radio and in my music… It was in every family on my block. It was most of my teachers and it was every textbook.”

**aspire:** to want to achieve something or to be successful

**biracial:** consisting of or combining two races

**carding:** the practice by police of stopping and checking residents with little or no cause

**Charter of Rights and Freedoms:** a bill of rights entrenched in the Constitution of Canada that guarantees certain political rights to Canadian citizens and civil rights of everyone in Canada

**colonialism:** the period when the part of North America that became Canada was ruled by Britain

**disproportionately:** in a manner that is bigger or smaller than expected in relation to something else

documented: recorded in writing or on film; supported with evidence

**documented**: recorded in writing or on film; supported with evidence

**entrenched:** established firmly and securely

**entrepreneur:** someone who uses money to start businesses and make business deals

incarceration rate: the percentage of people in a given population who are in jail

inclusive: deliberately aiming to involve all types of people

**imposed:** established by authority

**incarceration rate**: the percentage of people in a given population who are in jail

**inclusive:** deliberately aiming to involve all types of people

**Indian Act:** a Canadian federal law through which the federal government administers Indian status, local First Nations governments, and the management of reserve land and communal monies

**Indigenous Peoples:** of or referring to an original inhabitant of the land that is now Canada: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people

**institution:** a large organization such as a bank, hospital, university, or prison

**internment camps:** camps for political prisoners or prisoners of war

**multicultural:** involving or consisting of people of different cultures

**overrepresented:** having representatives in a proportion higher than the average

**policy:** a set of plans or actions agreed on by a government, political party, business, or other group

**privilege:** a special advantage or immunity or benefit not enjoyed by all

**segregation:** the policy of keeping people from different groups, especially different races, separate

**time immemorial:** used to refer to a point of time in the past that was so long ago that people have no knowledge or memory of it

**undeniable:** correct or true; not possible to deny

**Letter To My Children: Systemic Racism**

When I was a little girl, I attended school on our reserve. I was smart. I felt smart. I knew I was smart. I got top grades. Our school was small. We didn’t have a lot. But I never questioned why. I was happy. My best friends were my cousins. I was in a safe place.

Later, my family moved. I found myself on the first day of grade 9 walking into a foreign world. Public school. All the other kids looked different. They were not as friendly. I didn’t have my cousins. I was alone. I walked into Language Arts class, picked a seat in the back and wanted to cry. No one came up to me and said hello. People glanced back a few times to look. But no one acknowledged I was there. I felt invisible. I sat listening as our teacher talked about our newest novel study. What was going on with my brain? Why wasn’t I understanding anything he was saying? Why did I suddenly feel so stupid? And I was definitely not about to lift my hand and ask any questions for clarity. I had no voice.

As time went on I found myself in the “general math” class instead of Algebra where I should have been. It was easy. Too easy. But I didn’t care, I was with most of the other “brown kids’’ in my class. It felt safe there.

That year we had a project writing about what we wanted to be when we grew up. I never remembered my goal, but I do remember that my best friend – who was Indigenous, like me – said she wanted to be a lawyer. Our teacher said to her, “Maybe you should think of something more realistic.”

My grades in that school were okay but not nearly as good as they were when I went to our little school on the reserve.

A couple of years later, we moved back to the rez. I did my last two years of schooling back in my safe place with people who looked like me, laughed like me, spoke like me. I was once again receiving top grades. I graduated as the class valedictorian of a tiny class of 9.

So, what was the big difference? Why did I feel so smart in one school and stupid in the other?

I don’t ever remember people calling me racist slurs in public school. The teachers seemed overall quite nice. But I think the unspoken was louder and more clear than the spoken.

The public school didn’t have to tell me I was stupid. It just didn’t remind me of my intelligence. The public school didn’t tell me I wasn’t seen, it just didn’t acknowledge I was there. The public school didn’t tell me to be quiet. It just didn’t give me a safe space to speak up. I came from a different world and the people in this new world didn’t realize how important a simple “welcome”, spoken with love, can reach the heart of a child and impact their future.

So my dear children, when you came into our lives your Dad and I chose to homeschool you for six years. Yes, I’ll admit my short years in public school always remained in the back of my mind reminding me of what I never wanted you to experience. But what we knew for sure was that on the first day you walked into that public school, we wanted you to know your value. We wanted you to know how important you are. We wanted you to know how smart you are. We wanted it ingrained into your soul so that no one could come by later and make you believe differently. We wanted you to stand proud as Anishinaabe/Cree/Samoan kids. We wanted you to be ready to face any world that may look different than yours and have the confidence to keep walking with your head held high.

My beautiful children, you may have to fight harder, but it will make you stronger. You may have to run a little further, but that will give you endurance. You may hear negative words spoken to you, but brush them off and remember who you are. No matter the hardships you face due to the colour of your skin, always – always – walk in forgiveness because forgiveness will allow you to live a life filled with empathy. Empathy can connect hearts. Connected hearts will bring unity. And unity is unstoppable.

Love, Mom (Tina Savea)

