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**



A trip to the bank that most people wouldn’t think twice about became a nightmare when Maxwell Johnson from the Heiltsuk Nation and his 12-year-old granddaughter, Torianne, were handcuffed by police and treated like criminals.

On December 20, 2019, they visited a Bank of Montreal (BMO) branch in Vancouver to open Torianne’s first bank account. When they presented their government-issued **status cards** along with other forms of identification (ID), the employee took their cards and left them waiting. The ID was passed on to the bank manager, who called 911, citing “fake ID” and a large amount of money in Mr. Johnson’s account – money he had received from the government as part of an **Aboriginal rights settlement package**. The bank identified the pair as “suspects”.

When the Johnsons were called upstairs to get their ID, they were met by the police. They were released when it was confirmed that there was no criminal activity and no fraud committed. But it was clear to Mr. Johnson that he and his granddaughter had been racially **profiled**.

Mr. Johnson 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, and a course on **Indigenous** culture for all employees. In addition, it put artwork symbolizing forgiveness 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.

“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, to participate as witnesses in a washing ceremony to help the Johnson’s and the rest of the community begin to heal. The representatives were there to listen and learn, to ensure that a similar incident doesn’t happen again.

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, including paying an undisclosed amount of money to the Johnson family for damages sustained due to “injury to dignity.” The money came with an admission that the officers who had handcuffed the pair had discriminated against them because they are Indigenous. The officers were suspended, and the police board also paid $100,000 to the Heiltsuk First Nation’s **restorative justice** department. In addition, the police funded a
year-long community program for at-risk young women, including those who suffer anxiety from traumatic incidents, and agreed to create a position for an anti-Indigenous-racism officer to 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.

As part of the settlement, 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; however, the two officers who arrested the Johnsons did not attend. As a result, Mr. Johnson said that he, his family, and his community could not yet experience full healing from the trauma suffered. The apology event was switched to an “uplifting ceremony” for the Johnsons, with Mr. Johnson later asking the officers to come to the community 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**

When this request went unaddressed, in December 2023, Maxwell Johnson asked the B.C. police complaint commissioner to reopen the case against the two arresting officers to require them 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,” Heiltsuk Elected Chief Marilyn Slett explained in a statement after the 2022 uplifting ceremony.

Torianne told CBC News that the impact of events like these can be deep and long-lasting, and that 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

**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. Institutional racism. Racial profiling. Implicit bias. Structural inequality. You’ve probably heard these terms before. What do they mean? What do they look like?

Racism is an attitude or behaviour that unfairly discriminates or spreads hatred against other people based on their race. Systemic racism, on the other hand, is built into the way our system of institutions, policies, procedures, and laws have evolved over time.

Systemic racism is the reason why society is stacked against certain people — especially
non-whites — simply due to the colour of their skin. Despite their individual talents or **attributes**, they may be held back by systemic barriers.

These barriers make it harder to find employment, to get a loan, to start a business, or to get into post-secondary education. They mean that, on average, people with black or brown skin earn less money, achieve a lower level of education, have poorer health outcomes, and experience more violence in their lives.

Systemic racism is not always obvious. Good people can unwittingly participate in systemic racism. They are just following accepted practices. They may be unaware that these practices are responsible for creating inequality, or discriminate against certain groups of people.

**Digging down to the roots**

Systemic racism is often rooted in historical events, such as Canada’s **legacy** of British **colonialism**.
When the British colonized the ‘New World,’ they believed they were bringing civilization and religion to its inhabitants. Their treatment of **Indigenous** people was based on the **presumption** that Indigenous cultures were inferior. Colonizers believed Indigenous populations needed to be **assimilated**, **subjugated,** or **decimated**.

The colonial government imposed the **Indian Act**, which laid the framework for the systemic racism that Indigenous people have experienced ever since. This has been well-documented in the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous
Women and Girls.

Black Canadians, too, can find the roots of today’s systemic racism in the historical record. Many Canadians are not even aware that for two centuries, Canada practiced slavery against Blacks. Even after 1884, when slavery was officially prohibited in the British colonies, discrimination against Black populations continued in the form of officially-**sanctioned segregation**.

A 2017 United Nations report found that “Canada’s history of enslavement, racial segregation, and **marginalization** of African Canadians has left a legacy of anti-Black racism and has had a **deleterious** impact on people of African descent.”

Canada’s history of institutional racism also includes several chapters devoted to people of Asian descent. After bringing in 17,000 Chinese labourers to help build the Canadian Pacific Railway, in 1885 the Canadian government introduced a Chinese head tax that applied only to Chinese immigrants to discourage further immigration. The subsequent 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 – 75 percent of whom were Canadian citizens –into **internment camps**.

“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**

Without doubt, Canada has made much progress in reducing systemic racism. The Canadian government has publicly apologized for some of the country’s more **egregious** past human rights abuses. Many Canadians today take pride in our multicultural society. They look to our 1982 **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**, which states that everyone must be treated with the same respect, dignity, and consideration, as evidence that Canada rejects racism.

But when you dig into the data, you see troubling evidence of ongoing structural inequality.

For instance, 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 are often working in front-line health care and service jobs. They frequently ride public transit. They usually live in more crowded conditions, making 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 the proportion of the Canadian population, even though Black people are no more likely to commit crimes than any other racial group. Meanwhile, Indigenous people account for roughly three percent of this country’s adult population and 30.4 percent of Canada’s federal inmates.

“The Indigenization of Canada’s prison population is nothing short of a national **travesty**,” says the Correctional Investigator of Canada, Ivan Zinger.

Police forces have been singled out for using disproportionate violence against Black and Indigenous people. Black people are more likely to have encounters with police, and in Toronto, Black residents are 20 times more likely to be shot by police.

Critics also point to the practice of ‘carding,’ where police stop and check residents with little or no cause. This policy disproportionately affects racialized Canadians.

“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. “I have no safety concerns when I get stopped for speeding; my clients can’t always say the same. I am a white person; with all the systemic privilege this status grants me.”

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

A University of Toronto study published in 2016 looked at “resumé whitening.” Black and Asian job seekers were instructed to “whiten” their resumes by altering their last names so they did not sound ethnic. They also deleted any mention of extracurricular activities that might be thought more likely to be undertaken by Black or Asian people. The result was that those Blacks with “whitened” resumes were 2.5 times more likely to be selected for interviews than other Black applicants. Asian applicants were also much more likely to be selected if they “whitened” their resumes.

Implicit bias accounts for these results, says constitutional and human rights lawyer Darren Thorne.

“Studies have shown that people are often more comfortable around others with whom they can relate,” he says. “Unless checked, this natural **disposition** can cause us to **inadvertently** favour such people, and effectively discount or hinder those dissimilar to ourselves.

“Ultimately, this results in societal structures that reflect biases against those who are not in the dominant societal group — and then **perpetuates** this unequal status over time.

“It should be understood that the existence of systemic racism does not mean that everyone is racist, but rather that certain societal structures have been tainted so as to produce — sometimes
unwittingly — racist outcomes.”

You can see how this implicit bias towards ‘people like us’ would, over time, unfairly exclude certain groups.

Another factor that plays into structural inequality is privilege. Those with greater privilege are more likely to get ahead. They are likely to be white, to live in safer neighbourhoods, to attend good schools, and 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, those who lead our institutions, sit around corporate boardroom tables, make important decisions, and have influence — those whose lives appear to matter
more — are still **predominantly** white. Currently, 11 of Canada’s 338 MPs are Indigenous, and nine are Black.

Matthew Green is one of these few 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” impressed him powerfully and 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, and many notable Canadians have. But it’s harder. Despite cultural backgrounds and life experiences that contribute to the diversity and richness of Canadian society, the different experiences of the less privileged are often marginalized and disregarded.

And even when they become successful professionals, they still bump up against systemic racism. Brooks Arcand-Paul is a respected Alberta lawyer and MLA, who also 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 on multiple occasions by the police because he is Indigenous. Lori Anne Thomas, a Black criminal lawyer recently appointed to the Ontario Court of Justice, has been told by court staff move out of the area of the courtroom reserved for
lawyers – even though she was 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 avoid perpetuating systemic racism?

Understanding the issue is a good place to start. We can acknowledge that systemic racism exists, and learn to recognize it. We can learn about our country’s history and how racist elements have become **entrenched** in our institutions. We can reflect on the unconscious biases we ourselves may hold, and the role we play in perpetuating societal injustices.

We can look at our institutions through an anti-racism lens. Is “whiteness” the norm? Is there representation, particularly in leadership roles, from Indigenous people and members of racialized communities? Whose experiences are valued?

Acknowledging the existence of system racism in Canada is not to attack our country, our identity, or our values.

“Grappling with such truths is not somehow unpatriotic,” says constitutional lawyer 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. It was informed by input gathered during months of cross-country consultations with Canadians who have experienced racism and discrimination.

The prime minister says the government has listened. It will be introducing reforms in many areas, including policing and the legal system (for example, looking at Indigenous representation on juries).

One program, launched in 2021, 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**

“Growing up in a white suburb, I saw myself through the lens of whiteness and aspired to it,” says Brandon Yan. He is a biracial Canadian, with 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, and found it easier to get job interviews.

“Life rewarded me for erasing my Chineseness.”

Mr. Yan came to understand that when a society is built on racist attitudes, it impacts how you feel about who you are. As a Black, Indigenous, or Asian person, you start to doubt your self-worth.

“And here’s the thing. I don’t think anyone ever told me to be ashamed of being half-Chinese or mixed race. That’s the **insidiousness** of racism and white supremacy. It exists 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.”

**assimilate:** to absorb a culturally distinct group into the mainstream culture

**attribute:** a characteristic or quality

**Canadian 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

**decimate:** to spoil or destroy something, for example by getting rid of a lot of people

**deleterious:** harmful

**disposition:** a tendency to behave in a certain way

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

**egregious:** extremely bad

**entrenched:** established firmly and securely

**inadvertently:** not deliberately; without knowledge or intention

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

**insidiousness:** subtle and cumulative harmfulness

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

**legacy:** something such as a tradition or problem that exists as a result of something that happened in the past

**marginalization:** the social process of becoming or being made unimportant or irrelevant

**perpetuate:** to make something such as a situation or process continue, especially one that is wrong, unfair, or dangerous

**predominantly:** mainly, or mostly

**presumption:** a belief that something is true because it seems reasonable or likely

**sanctioned:** formally approved and invested with legal authority

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

**subjugate:** to defeat a group of people and force them to obey you

**travesty:** a situation, action, or event that is shocking because it is very different from what it should be or because it seems very unfair

**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)

