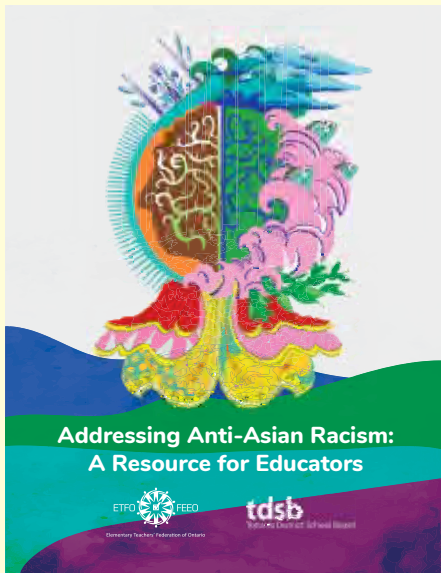


BUILDING ANTI-OPPRESSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS



This curriculum insert was excerpted from a new 90-page resource called Addressing Anti-Asian Racism: A Resource for Educators. This educator document is the first of its kind in Canada. It positions Black lives and Indigeneity as essential to addressing anti-Asian racism and offers historical and contemporary learning and strategies for members to use to disrupt racism in schools. This resource is available for free download at etfo.ca.

In this excerpt we address the question: How can educators and administrators build anti-oppressive learning environments in their schools? We focus on eight guiding principles and provide examples, experiences and best practices for each.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EDUCATORS

1. EXAMINING BIASES

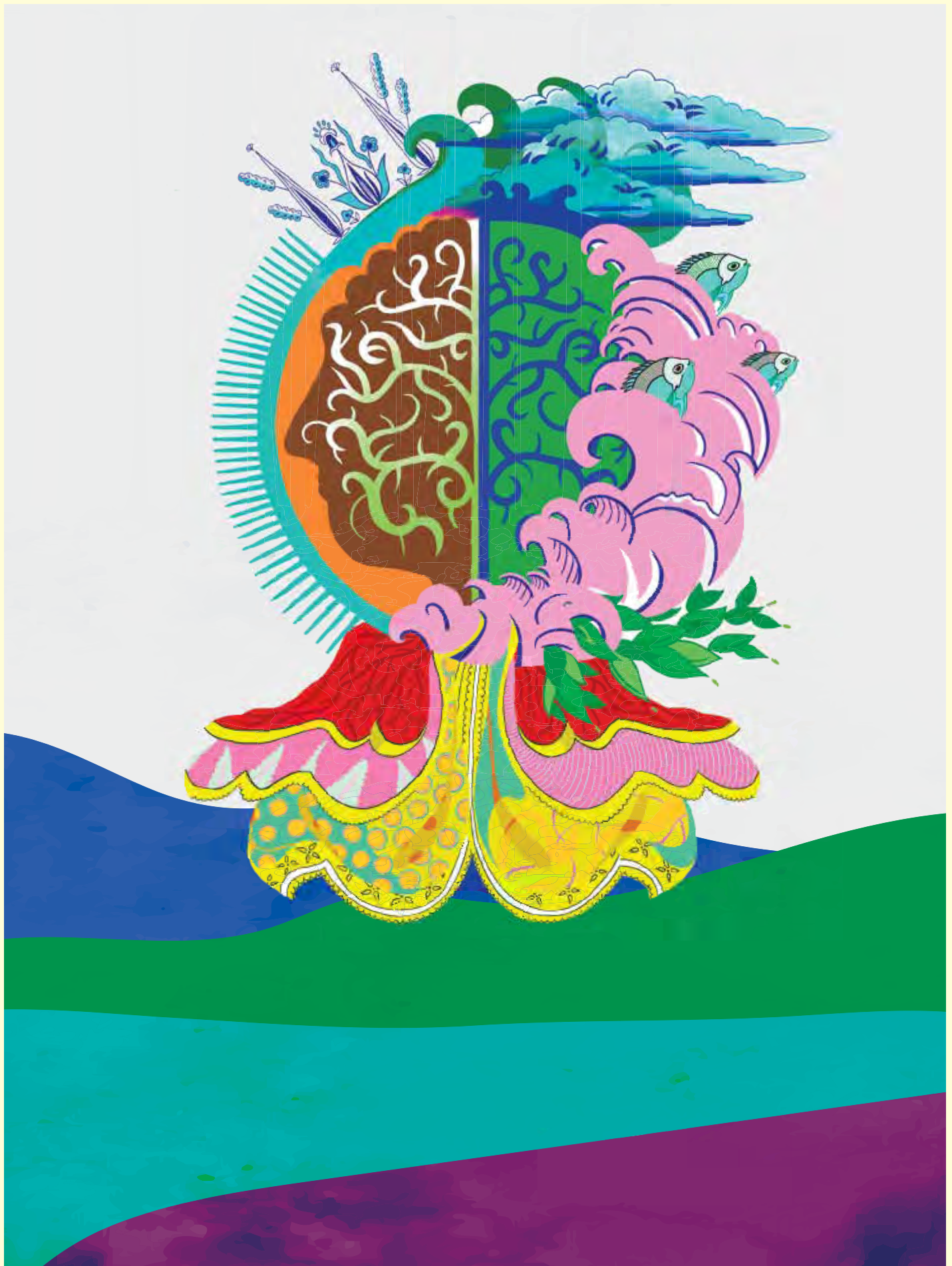
In elementary school my teacher called my parents in for a meeting to recommend that I receive ESL support because I didn't say very much in class. Perplexed by her suggestion, my parents clarified that I was born and raised in Toronto and that my first language is English. She was surprised. My teacher had assumed based on my Chinese identity that I was a non-native English speaker. Her assumption stemmed from the stereotype of Asians as "forever foreign." We all have implicit biases that inform our beliefs and actions. Our task as educators is to vigilantly examine our assumptions by reflecting on questions such as: Why do I feel or think this way? Are my beliefs informed by evidence or based on assumptions? Where do these assumptions come from? "Perpetual foreigner," "model minority," Asian boys as "weak," Asian girls as "passive." How might these historically entrenched and racist stereotypes be informing my practice? Most importantly, What am I going to do to change that? When we see our students as individuals as opposed to monolithic groups, we start to unlearn problematic associations. Examining our biases and microaggressions often entails a degree of discomfort. But this is usually a good sign that the work we are doing is anti-oppressive.

2. CHALLENGING POWER AND PRIVILEGE

An anti-oppressive educator continually examines their own power and privilege and teaches their students to do the same. What is power? What is privilege? Who has it and who does not? How can we make things more fair and equitable? Consider these questions regularly in your decision-making and interactions with students and families. Work with your students to define these terms and embed these questions in all areas of learning. At the primary level, I engaged students in inquiries about, "Power on the playground" and "Why is it easier for you than me?" to uncover concepts of privilege. There will be times where your power and privilege may cloud your judgement. It is important to model vulnerability for your students and say, "I made a mistake," "I'm sorry," "Here's how I will do better." When we hold ourselves accountable, we empower students to engage in difficult conversations and question power systems.

3. RECOGNIZING INTERSECTIONALITIES

Intersectionality is crucial for destabilizing assumptions of "Asian-ness" as monolithic. We know that "Asian" encompasses diverse cultural and ethnic identities, and it alone does not account for differences of class, gender, sexuality and ability. It is important to teach students about class, gender, sexuality, and ability in order to help them understand that identity is complex and fluid. One essential resource is trans author Vivek Shraya's, *The Boy & the Bindi*, about a young boy who wants to wear a bindi



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even though it is typically worn by women in South Asian communities. The book disrupts normative representations of culture and gender and teaches children to take pride in their unique identities. When exploring books about intersectional identities with primary students, try to include prompts such as: What shade is your skin? Or, How are families represented in this story? An anti-oppressive educator ensures that intersectional identities are respected and reflected in the learning process.



4. LEVERAGING MARGINALIZED VOICES

The 2011-12 TDSB Census Portraits show that East and Southeast Asian students reported feeling “less comfortable participating, answering questions, and speaking up in class” than their peers (Yau et al., 2015a, pp. 2; Yau et al., 2015c, pp. 2). This data illustrates the absence of East and Southeast Asian student voices in our schools. It suggests that we have not created the necessary conditions for students to feel safe to participate. Students need to see themselves reflected in their learning. Use resources from diverse Asian perspectives to initiate culturally relevant conversations. I talk about my experiences as a second-generation Chinese Canadian, as well as my encounters with racism, to encourage students to share their own stories. Participation can be challenging for English Language Learners. Provide them with diverse opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and connect to their own identities. These efforts should be ongoing and not relegated to cultural holidays. Do not assume that because your students are not speaking up, they have nothing to say. It is crucial to foster an environment where they feel empowered to speak and where their voices are heard.



5. HOLDING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Anti-oppressive educators have high expectations for all students. The tendency, however, is to focus on academic achievement. High expectations must encompass all areas of growth, including leadership, creativity and risk-taking. It is easy for us to assume that many of our Asian students do not need our support because of their academic success. But despite performing as well as or better than their peers in academic achievement, East and Southeast Asian students reported feeling less confident in most academic abilities (Yau et al., 2015a, pp. 6; Yau et al., 2015c, pp. 6). Holding high expectations for Asian students includes believing that they can be leaders, performers, artists, and athletes. To help strengthen these skills, encourage your students to become more involved in school activities. Do not confuse perfectionism with high expectations. Instead, let’s teach our students to embrace mistakes as an essential part of learning and success.



6. CRITICALLY INVESTIGATING HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When we teach diverse histories, our students develop an understanding of who they are and why they matter. We also challenge dominant narratives of white supremacy that teach children to equate “Canadian-ness” with “whiteness.” At the primary level, have students investigate their own family histories and explore Asian communities (e.g., Little India, Little

Tibet, Koreatown). Encourage students to ask questions: Who lives here? What makes this place special or important?

At the junior level, have students learn about Asian Canadian politicians, activists and community organizers, and invite them into your classrooms. At the intermediate level, give voice to marginalized Asian histories by having students learn about the Komagata Maru incident (1914), the Chinese Exclusion Act (1923-1947) and the Japanese internment (1941-1949).

Challenge your students to critically analyze both the positive representations of national goodwill (like Canada's response to the 1970's Vietnamese refugee crisis) and racist power structures that persist today (like the lack of protections for Filipinx migrant workers). By confronting Canada's racist history and treatment of Asian communities, we dispel the myth of an infallible Canadian multiculturalism in our fight for racial justice.



7. SUPPORTING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

According to 2011-12 TDSB Census Portraits, many East and Southeast Asian students and some of South Asian descent felt that they did not have adults at school they could turn to for help (Yau et al., 2015a, pp. 3; Yau et al., 2015b, pp. 3; Yau et al., 2015c, pp. 3). Students of East Asian and Vietnamese descent were less likely to report feeling positively about themselves or their futures. Many of these students experienced significant anxiety, loneliness, and low self-confidence (Yau et al., 2015a, pp. 5; Yau et al., 2015c, pp. 5). The stereotype of the quiet Asian student may make us dangerously ignorant of those who are suffering silently and alone. To support mental health, we can make time to connect with students and families. We can validate students' feelings and teach healthy coping strategies. Talking about

race and racism is an important part of identity building and healing. By prioritizing mental health, we establish safety and trust and we create a culture of compassion and belonging.



8. MOBILIZING STUDENTS TO TAKE POSITIVE SOCIAL ACTION

"You cannot change any society unless you take responsibility for it, unless you see yourself as belonging to it and responsible for changing it."

— Grace Lee Boggs

Interview: *Revolution as a New Beginning*

It is not enough to just talk about the existence of racial injustice. After establishing the historical and systemic basis for these inequalities, the next question is: What are you going to do about it? Social action is fundamental to anti-oppressive teaching and the goal should always be to create change. To do so, ask your students: What really matters to you? Where do you want to see change? How can we go about achieving that? Connect with community groups for inspiration and assistance and consider programs that promote civic engagement. Girls' Government is a program that engages Grade 8 girls in public policy and issues that are relevant to their communities. Remember, students are never too young to make change. In one school, Kindergarten and Grade 1 students wrote letters to the principal asking for age-appropriate play equipment because they were too small to use the playground. For students' actions to be meaningful, the social and political issues they engage with need to stem from their own values and insights. ■

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