

# How Might BC Schools Tackle Racism?

With the rise in racist rhetoric, The Tyee asks teachers and advocates how to help students fight back.

In an op-ed [published](#) on The Tyee last week, University of British Columbia education professor Michelle Stack called on her fellow white educators to talk to their students about racism:

“We need to refuse to minimize the oppression despite the temptation to do so. White supremacy is real and does immeasurable harm. What do we teach our children? Do they learn about white supremacy and racism and ways to fight against it?”

Racism is part of the legacy of British Columbia, from its founding on unceded First Nations land more than 150 years ago. That legacy is taught in the province’s kindergarten to Grade 12 curriculum, including residential schools and the [Sixties Scoop](#), the [Chinese head tax](#), Japanese internment camps, and the hundreds of Sikh migrants aboard the Komagata Maru denied entry to the province.

But if you talk to B.C. students and teachers, they’ll tell you racism isn’t just in the past. They hear it in hissed slurs in the halls, and through stereotypes raised in class. They see it in the lunch tables divided by race and culture.

And that doesn’t include what happens outside of school. A [survey](#) commissioned by Vancity credit union earlier this year showed that 82 per cent of participants who self-identified as a visible minority had experienced prejudice or discrimination.

With the current climate in the U.S. (and Donald Trump in the White House), racist rhetoric has found its way back into the mainstream discourse. BC Teachers' Federation president Glen Hansman says the way that schools address racism must change to reflect that.

“We also have the responsibility as a union — and the Ministry of Education, working with school boards, too — to make sure that we are equipping teachers properly to be able to have these conversations in schools, and we're still not there yet,” he said.

### **‘1980s approach to multiculturalism’**

So what supports do B.C. teachers have to provide anti-racism education?

Five years ago, the BC Teachers' Federation's Committee for Action on Social Justice released [“Show Racism the Red Card,”](#) an anti-racism teaching resource.

Based on a similar program in the United Kingdom, the “lesson aid” includes background information for teachers on anti-racism education, as well as sample lesson plans for kindergarten to Grade 12. The resource is available online for free, though Hansman acknowledges it needs to be updated.

The union also provides its own [anti-racism workshops](#) for teachers, including how to teach from an anti-oppression framework; making schools racism-free for Indigenous students; and deconstructing racist myths.

But access to the workshops is limited for teachers who live outside of B.C.'s urban hubs, and cuts to school districts' professional development budgets means there is little or no support in some districts for anti-racism professional development.

“All teachers have a bit of understanding about how to do anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom based on their own school experience or what

they received in teacher education training,” Hansman said. “But we can’t just rest on our laurels about what we encountered 20 years ago.”

Since the [mass shooting](#) at a Quebec City mosque earlier this year, the union has received pushback from the public and some teachers who believe the best way to address racism is to be “colour-blind” and not talk about it at all, Hansman said.

That’s a “1980s approach to multiculturalism,” he added. “It negates the very real lived experience of students from marginalized groups, including racialized groups. It also nullifies that differences that people are proud of.”

### **Using privilege for good**

While the new curriculum calls on teachers to include Indigenous content in all courses, it also provides a lot of leeway for teachers in approaching topics — including the freedom to gloss over or avoid tough topics like racism.

Annie Ohana makes the conscious choice to deconstruct racism in her classes. Ohana, who teaches social science, law and social justice, and is the Aboriginal teacher advisor at L.A. Matheson Secondary in Surrey, B.C., starts every school year with a class discussion about privilege.

“We absolutely start with white privilege, male privilege, etc. But there’s many different forms of privilege: education, citizen, heterosexual — there’s tons,” she said. It’s not about making students feel bad, she said, but exploring how they can use their privileges to help others.

Ohana, who helped organize the counter-protest to the anti-Muslim rally planned for Vancouver this month, exposes her students to voices and perspectives not found in most textbooks. For example, when discussing the First World War she doesn’t just focus on European experience but also that of the one million Indian soldiers who fought alongside the British.

A big part of Ohana's approach to anti-racist education is disrupting students' comfort zones, she said. That can be as simple as changing the seating plan so students work with different people. It also means being open to dialogue on students' viewpoints, even when they disagree with her own.

"Everybody can have an opinion and can have it heard. They need to be ready to be challenged — not in a violent way, but a way that is respectful of other people," she said.

"If somebody says, 'I'm against Islam because the Qu'ran advocates for violence,' for example, if other students would like to counter that and break that down, we're going to do so in a safe space."

That doesn't mean it's safe to spread hate in Ohana's class, though. "You're not allowed to point fingers. You're not allowed to swear at another person or insult them," she said. "You are in a school and there are rules to follow."

### **Diversity in the classroom**

Education isn't just the domain of teachers, however. The Tyee reached out to anti-racist advocates and community groups for their thoughts on how schools should address racism.

One of those advocates is Jessie Kaur Lehaul, co-founder of the [Kaur Project](#), which takes its name and focus from the stories of Sikh women in B.C. who have adopted Kaur as a middle or last name.

Lehaul shows students in the classes she's visited the differences and similarities between the women featured in the Kaur Project, and the students' own lives.

"It really doesn't matter what background these women are, they just showcase that we're all humans and we all have trials and tribulations. They're just socially and culturally different on some levels," she said.

“And it’s an opportunity for understanding, to learn something new, and also to have empathy for other people.”

Lehail, who spoke at last month’s counter-protest and has visited Ohana’s classes, says it’s important for teachers and schools to address racist incidents. But they could be proactive, too, and tackle these issues before anything happens.

“Ensure that non-Caucasian voices, ideas, authors and thoughts are included [in your lessons]. It’s important to have Indigenous voices, women’s voices, people of colour, to show that there is diversity,” she said, adding this shouldn’t be limited to books but include people from the community, bringing them into the classroom.

Wendy Addo of Black Lives Matter-Vancouver agrees, advocating for schools to develop ongoing relationships with B.C.’s black and Indigenous communities.

But the first step towards creating an anti-racist school environment, she says, is schools and districts asking themselves what they’re doing to make their schools safe for students of colour, where their voices and viewpoints are respected.

“Is there an accessible and swift path to recourse for students who have been the victims of racism within the school and/or the school community? Is the school fostering a culture of accessibility and accommodation for [English Language Learning] students and a culture of accommodating and respecting non-white cultural practices in the school and community?” Addo wrote in a Facebook message to The Tyee.

Addo wants the curriculum to include lessons about white privilege, supremacy, and fragility, as well as the historic and current impacts of colonialism on people of colour.

“[Students] need to learn a critical perspective on the police, the military and contemporary and historic land occupation,” she wrote. “They need to learn often erased and neglected parts of our history such as the

histories of genocide, forced eviction and slavery in Canada, and the histories of Indigenous and African-Canadian communities — their struggles and their resistance.”

### **Learning from the past**

Addo isn't advocating for a total erasure of the old, Eurocentric curriculum. Instead, she says that teachers should use it as a critical thinking lesson on how historical narratives can cover up other people's histories in favour of a white supremacist narrative.

Edward Liu, an anti-racism advocate from Richmond who helped organize a protest against the anti-Chinese flyers that appeared in his city last November, echoed Addo's assessment of the white-centric provincial history that was taught to many British Columbians.

“The history of B.C. gives the impression that it was the European colonists who built the province single-handedly. People from other ethnic groups were just some sort of supporting actors that helped the white colonists,” Liu wrote in an email to The Tyee.

“For instance, the Chinese were more than railroad workers who just appeared in the early 1880s; they were one of the major contributors to many of the interior communities in southern B.C. area, even before B.C. joined Canada.”

The multicultural social service organization [S.U.C.C.E.S.S.](#) is no stranger to community discussions on racism. After those anti-Chinese flyers appeared in Richmond mailboxes last fall, the organization held a community forum to discuss racism against newcomers.

They're following it up with a series of smaller roundtable discussions called All Our Neighbours, held in different Lower Mainland communities. The first [roundtable](#), held in June, happened at Tyee Elementary and included students.

While recognizing some school districts may already be doing this work, Winnie Tam, director of strategic communications and marketing at S.U.C.C.E.S.S., suggested that districts develop comprehensive policies on inclusion and anti-racism, including how teachers, students and parents can report and followup on racist incidents at school.

Tam also echoed Hansman's recommendation that teachers, as well as school administrators, receive anti-racism and inclusion training, while providing age appropriate programming for students, and settlement support for newcomer families and kids.

The Tye reached out to the First Nations Education Steering Committee and the Urban Native Youth Association for their thoughts on what schools should do to battle racism, but did not hear back by press time.

However, an early 2000s FNEESC [document](#) provides suggestions from the BC Aboriginal Education Partners Committee — a working group made up of FNEESC, teachers, provincial government representatives and school administrators — on tackling racism against Indigenous students.

Suggestions included educating and hiring more Indigenous teachers; building support and awareness for Indigenous-focused courses like First Peoples 12; educating teachers on Indigenous issues; and including students in the development of anti-racism programs.

More than a decade later progress has been made, but work still needs to be done.

“Certainly the auditor general’s report on the experience of Aboriginal youth in schools should have been a wake-up call for the entire sector,” said Hansman, referring to a [2015 report](#) — released more than a decade after FNEESC’s anti-racism suggestions — highlighting the “racism of low-expectations” that brings down the Indigenous youth graduation rate.

“One of the solutions to that has to be making space for students’ voices to come to the fore,” said Hansman. “Actually listening to what they’re saying and not minimizing their experiences.”

\*Correction, Aug. 28. A caption accompanying the cover photo for this story today previously misidentified the subjects. 🙏

Read more: [Indigenous Affairs](#), [Rights + Justice](#), [Education](#)