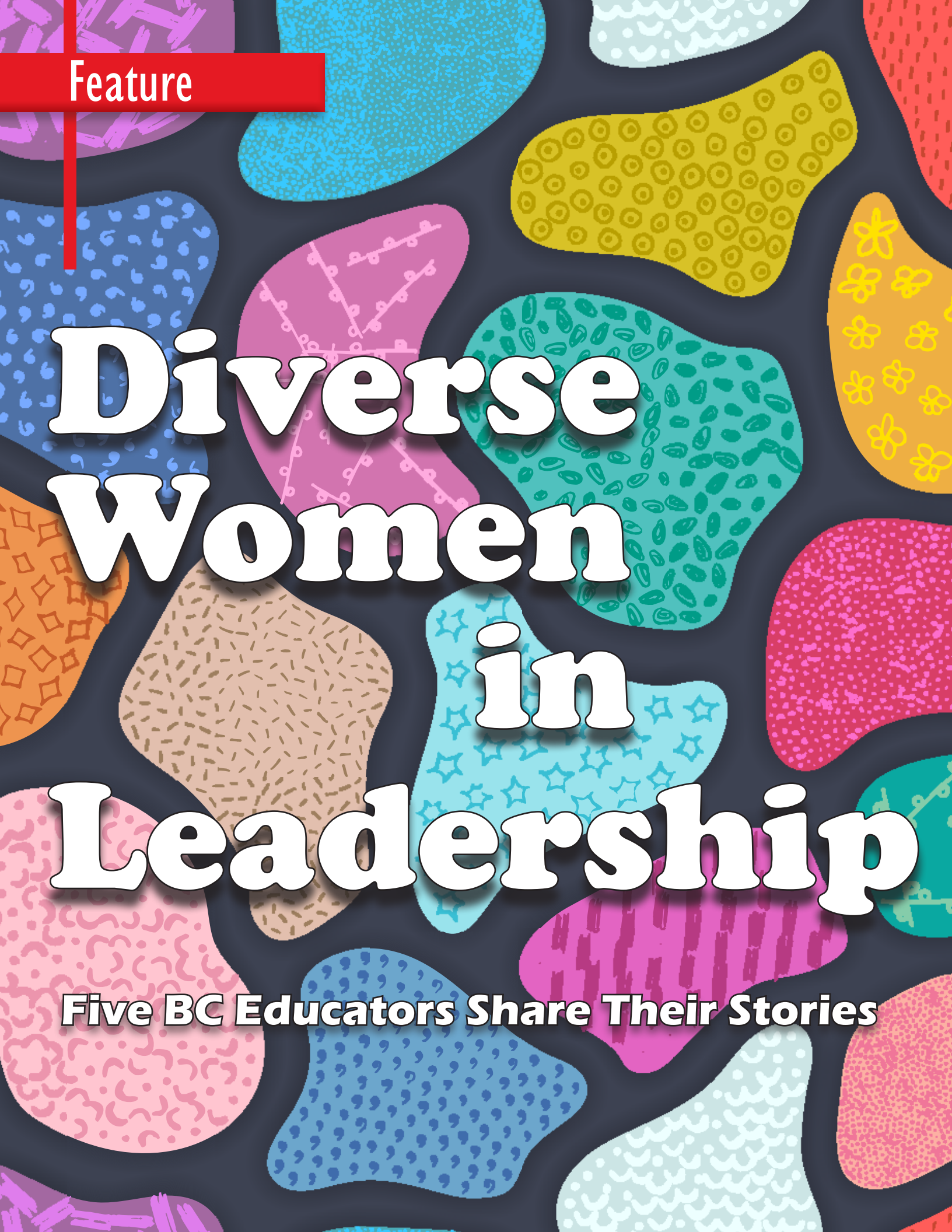


The background is a dark navy blue with numerous overlapping, organic, blob-like shapes in various colors including purple, blue, teal, yellow, orange, pink, and brown. Each shape is filled with a different pattern: some have small dots, some have larger circles, some have wavy lines, some have stars, and some have abstract scribbles. A red vertical line runs down the left side of the page, and a red horizontal bar is positioned at the top left, containing the word 'Feature' in white.

Feature

Diverse Women in Leadership

Five BC Educators Share Their Stories

The BCPVPA's most recent comprehensive member survey revealed that more than 65% of our members identify as women.¹ This figure has demonstrated an upward trend, and is nearer to reflecting the gender representation in BC's teacher population, which is close to 75% ², but still outdistances the representation of women in senior leadership, 25% as noted by Principal Shannon Behan in her comments regarding her recent doctoral research in this issue's "Day in the Life" article.

More and more BC teachers have pulled back the curtain to learn about the school leader role. The BCPVPA's **Explorations for Aspiring School Leaders** program has offered that critical introduction of the role to curious educators seeking new challenges, and women have been represented strongly in registration both for this course, and for the **Foundations for New School Leaders** program. Women are stepping up, stepping in, and bringing their whole selves to the role, balancing responsibilities to children, families, and aging parents, and avidly continuing their learning once they are actively leading in schools and district offices.

Among the women who have attained the key educational leadership role of Principal or Vice-Principal are women from diverse cultural backgrounds who were not typically represented as school administrators in previous decades. Their paths to leadership, and their experiences, have been as varied as they are. The very visible and very public role of a Principal or Vice-Principal is open to scrutiny from peers, senior leaders, staff, students, families, school communities, and sector players.

With everything that they have achieved so far in their careers, and the sometimes-winding road they have followed, what is it like for women of diverse cultural backgrounds to lead in BC schools? Five school leaders generously offer their stories, and we hope these accounts can spark a conversation, within our membership and beyond.

1 BCPVPA Member Survey, 2019

2 <https://bcpsea.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/19-20-All-Groups-Headcount-by-Gender.pdf>



Ranjit Bains is the Principal of
Windermere Secondary School
in the Vancouver School District (SD 39)

Ranjit

had attended college in India and worked as an airplane mechanic. When he moved to Canada, his Indian education was not recognized, and he worked in sawmills for the rest of his life. My mom was not permitted to attend school past the first grade. We saw in our parents two very intelligent, resourceful, and hard-working people. I had a responsibility to respect my parents' sacrifices and honour my opportunity and privilege. I was the first in my family born in Canada, and the first to attend university. I have always had an appetite for learning and used to say if someone would pay me to be a student for life, I would do it. Being an educator is exactly that: I continue to learn and grow, stay young by working with youth, and get paid for it!

Though I didn't enter the education profession with the goal of becoming a leader, the journey to leadership was a natural one for me. Growing up, I watched my dad and his involvement in various leadership roles both within our community and at our local Sikh temple. He truly embodied the concept of a servant leader; he believed his role was to serve and support others so the whole community thrived. He was an empathic listener and a collaborative decision maker. At the dinner table, he would share stories about his role on the temple council. These conversations were foundational to my own learning about relationships, service, and leadership. My dad passed away a few years ago and I remember his life and leadership lessons every day. I know he was proud that his sacrifices for our family and his profound influence led to my becoming the first female South Asian secondary school Principal in Vancouver in 2017.

The inspiration to join the education profession was my family. One of my uncles was a respected teacher in India, and he had a profound influence on those he taught. When he moved to Canada in the 1980s, he would often stay with us and modelled what it meant to be a lifelong learner and educator. He read voraciously, learned to drive a car when he was in his 60s, and taught my siblings and me how to read Punjabi and play soccer. His love for teaching and learning was foundational in my own journey.

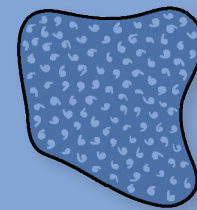
On a day-to-day basis, my parents encouraged my siblings and me to obtain a higher education and find careers which served others and brought us joy. My parents immigrated from India to Canada in the 1970s to provide better opportunities for the family. My dad

One of the biggest challenges I've faced is the microaggressions and assumptions people make about me and my leadership role. My first year as a Vice-Principal, I was placed in the school in which I had taught for over 12 years. I was elated and proud that my involvement and hard work was recognized, and that I had the opportunity to continue serving in the school I considered home. I was quickly deflated when one of my colleagues, who I had known for years, made a comment: "Well, we all know why you got the job. You check all the right boxes." I can't remember how I responded. I would like to think it was something witty that put them in their place. However I responded, the comments affected me deeply and I realized that it was quite possible that others shared this perspective. It was discouraging to think that people were going to see my ethnicity, gender, and age and believe that I obtained my position through 'equal opportunity' initiatives rather than from my hard work. Since then, I have felt that I have to work ten times harder than everyone else to prove that I am in the role because of my competence, not due to checking the right boxes.

Unfortunately, during my ten years as an Administrator, I have come up against these types of biases and microaggressions too often. I work to overcome by leading from a place of integrity, honesty, empathy, and compassion. When I have a chance to use my voice and position to advocate for and elevate others, I do. I let my work speak for itself and don't concern myself with the assumptions others may make. The greatest reward for my efforts is when I know I have deconstructed a person's initial assumptions about me, and demonstrated that I am in my role for a reason.

My advice to others would be to be confident and authentic. You have valuable insights and an essential voice to bring to the decision-making table. Don't be afraid to let your culture and background influence your leadership style, it is who you are, and you don't have to change to be an effective leader. Share this

context and your philosophies with the people you work with and lead. It will help them understand diverse voices and perspectives and hopefully – ultimately – better understand the diversity of our students. There is no better way to use your leadership platform than to allow your authentic self to inform and improve the experiences of our diverse learners.



**“Don’t be afraid
to let your culture
and background
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it is who you are,
and you don’t have
to change to be an
effective leader.”**

Ranjit Bains



Wendy Yu is the Principal of
Gleneagle Secondary School
in the Coquitlam School District (SD 43)

Wendy

wand. Looking back, I should have known that I was meant to be a teacher.

My hard-working immigrant parents had the hopes that many immigrant parents have for their children. I was going to go to school, earn good grades, and become a doctor. That was a respected career that would be a good income earner. While I could have rebelled, it wasn't in my nature. I went to school, earned those good grades, and headed straight to university after high school.

As a teacher, I enjoyed trying different things. I taught at the elementary level, middle level, and secondary level. I took on various roles at the school, chaired committees and was a department head. After teaching for about 10 years, the next logical thing that I thought I should try was a more formal leadership role.

Honestly, through all of it, I never really felt marginalized at all. I didn't realize how my differences played into situations. As I think about it now, there were definitely obstacles.

As a new Principal, parents often commented "Oh, but you're so young," or "I never had such a pretty Principal as a kid". I took it as a compliment at the time, and laughed it off. Now I wonder if my male colleagues received such comments. Was there more to those comments? Was it a compliment? Would this be considered a microaggression? I didn't give it much thought. But I noticed it.

On the flip side, there were also positive experiences.

My parents always called me a banana – yellow on the outside and white on the inside. I identified with my Canadian upbringing, and I struggled because I was never Chinese enough to my family but certainly didn't look 'white' to the rest of the world.

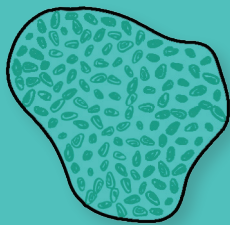
As a child, I played 'school' with my sister all the time. I was the teacher, of course, and I leaned the small chalkboard against the wall in the living room and taught my younger sister how to multiply and divide. I gave her spelling tests, and I made her do book reports (my favourite being the book report on *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*). I read *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* so many times I had it memorized, and for a treat I would play the 45 RPM record of *Sleeping Beauty*, and have my sister follow along and turn the pages when she heard the magic

One was when I came to secondary school, and I was asked to introduce a Women in Business event. The students indicated that they were so happy to see a woman as a Principal in a secondary school. I'm grateful to them for opening my eyes a bit wider. At the time I didn't notice, but now I do.

It's not until the past couple of years that the idea of equity and awareness of cultural competence has been on my radar. I'm noticing things more and more.

Now, I am so proud to be a Chinese woman. It's a realization that took time, and really had me examining my identity and values; I think I had to wait until I felt more secure and confident about myself.

If you are a woman from a diverse background, I encourage you to pursue a leadership role. Your voice needs to be heard. In order to see things differently, and appreciate many perspectives, it is important to have different people sitting at the table. Even though you may not realize that you bring something different, know that you do. Look around, and you will start to notice it too.



“... through all of it, I never really felt marginalized at all. I didn't realize how my differences played into situations. As I think about it now, there were definitely obstacles.”

Wendy Yu

Iram

I knew from early on that I wanted to be a teacher because I loved being at school and I had an insatiable thirst for learning. I spent a lot of time in the library, listening to the things that were happening in other students' lives while reading about stories of people from around the world. In class, I'd finish my work quickly then creep towards my teachers' desks, drawing them into conversations about anything. I learned a lot through listening.

Through all my elementary and secondary school years, I came across only one racialized teacher when I was in grade 4. She taught grade 6 and she was Indian. I was fascinated by her and I wanted to be like her. She was elegant, confident, and 'modern'. She fit in despite her skin colour. I remember how surprised I was when teachers transformed our library to host a beautiful traditional, 'white' bridal shower for her, even though she was Indian. I never had her as a teacher and I don't remember ever having a conversation with her, but just her presence as a teacher at my school was enough to show me that someone who looked like me could be a teacher.

As a teacher, there were many women who supported and encouraged me to share my knowledge and to take on leadership roles. I taught in urban schools, and there was diversity all around me. I still look to some of these teachers for guidance and support. When I first became a school administrator 14 years ago, I entered a work space that was quite different. Most of the administrators at the time were men, and there were only a few administrators who were visibly diverse.



Iram Khan is the Principal of
David Brankin Elementary School
in the Surrey School District (SD 36)

Being a school administrator can be an isolating experience. Being a racialized woman school administrator adds more complexity to the role. When you are a leader of the school, you are constantly under a lot of scrutiny. Members of my school communities have not hesitated to let me know that they preferred to speak to a male colleague, and for years I tolerated racist comments and microaggressions that included:

“You speak very good English”

“Where do you come from?”

“You are lucky to have a year round tan.”

“Do we have a brown Principal because we have

so many brown students. Why didn't we get a white Principal?”

“You won't suspend the other kid because he's like you.”

“My son is being bullied, there is reverse discrimination going on here.”

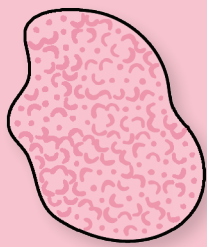
However, at the same time, I have had positive experiences as a result of being a racialized woman. Many racialized women and students have been more comfortable sharing personal stories with me, particularly related to domestic abuse, childhood trauma, and cultural conflicts. In my first year, I had a mother tell me, “Thank God, finally I can understand how my son is doing in school,” because we spoke the same language. She was so happy, even though my Urdu is terrible!

Every time I go to a gathering of school leaders, I do a quick scan to see if the group is diverse. Often, I am disappointed, and a feeling of isolation and panic swells up in me. I know I am going to need to work harder to make myself heard, be a good representative of diversity, and be open to answer questions about ‘my culture’. The pressure to be the one to speak up for diversity, and to question decisions made from one dominant lens, is mentally exhausting.

We have a big problem. Our communities are diverse, yet we do not see that diversity represented in our school leaders, or reflected in the way our school systems operate. As a leader with the privileges that come with the title of ‘school administrator’, we have the responsibility to create leaders who come from diverse backgrounds in our staff, students, and parent community. This is the only way the systems in place that guide education can be changed to reflect the values and needs of our diverse communities.

We need more racialized women leaders in education, and we need to remove the barriers that prevent them from advancing to leadership roles. I have

found creating and joining different affinity network groups to be very helpful. They create a sense of belonging, and ignite confidence. Affinity groups share the load in tackling workplace discrimination, microaggressions, and systemic racism. They create spaces for people to share their struggles, support one another, and heal from systemic trauma. As a result of the support of these courageous spaces, stories of identity, intersectionality, adversity, and success can be shared with the wider community. Stories draw people together, push us to reflect and allow us to better understand why changes need to be made.



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Iram Khan

Ji-Ai

I have always valued education. From early on, in Korea, my mother encouraged me to read and learn anything and everything. After immigrating to Canada as a young child, I had a difficult time adjusting to my new life – my parents divorced, my mom left behind, new step-mom and step-siblings, emotional abuse – and the new language and culture. However, whenever I had problems, I could always count on my teachers to encourage and support me in getting through; even though they may not have been aware of my issues, I appreciated that I could always count on them to be on my side. In high school, I connected closely with the science teachers, especially Mr. Moore who was my biology teacher. I spent time at school hanging out in the science lab, rather than going home. I fell in love with the world of biology – the jars of preserved specimen, microscope slides, taxidermy (strange, I know!) and this helped me decide to go into the field of biology at UBC. There, in third year, I transferred to the Education department. I had always loved children, and I thought that there would be nothing more wonderful than to share my love and knowledge of science with them. Looking back, I think that I wanted to be there for children who may have gone through traumatic experiences, in the way that my own teachers were there for me.

After 21 years of classroom teaching in a high school, I was looking for my next challenge. I was also interested in working with NGOs in developing countries, with teacher professional development, and I needed administrative experience for that. So, I tried my hand at school-based leadership as a department head and as a Vice-Principal, and I found



Ji-Ai Cho is a recently retired Principal living in Squamish, BC (SD 48)

that I enjoyed being able to contribute to the school in a deeper way. I enjoyed connecting with the students, staff, and families in a way that was beyond the scope of a classroom teacher. Subsequently, I joined the NGO, Education Beyond Borders (EBB) and have been working in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda) as a teacher professional development facilitator since 2010. After retirement, I would like to continue to work with the educators in East Africa. My doctorate work that is in progress examines the collaboration process among the Canadian and Kenyan teachers who worked together with EBB.

Most of the time, I am not conscious of being a diverse woman in leadership. Sometimes, though, I am reminded of my difference in abrupt and often unpleasant ways. Sometimes, the racism has been out in the open, such as being called names face-to-face, during phone conversations, through graffiti in the washrooms, by colleagues, students, and families. More often, the racism and the microaggressions are very subtle, and I am puzzled by the interactions until I can put my finger on the reason. Whenever I have encountered racist behaviours, I have confronted the people involved and reminded them that they are being inappropriate. This process has not been easy, and there have been varying degrees of success. But I recognize that when I identify the behaviour, the person knows not to behave this way toward me again. Sometimes, the racism is ingrained, and the negative behavior is repeated; for these circumstances, I had to go to my union or a third party to resolve the issue, or to at least end the bad behaviour.

When I first started my career in the Fraser Valley, I was the only young, female, atheist, Asian science teacher in my school. The school was in for a shock with my different ways of thinking. I had to take one of my colleagues to the teachers' union because he would refer to me as the 'oriental express' whenever he talked to his students about me. I asked him to stop, but he thought that it was 'funny', and that it was okay. It was not okay. My strategy in dealing with



racism and microaggression is to call it out, every time, and this can become very tiring. However, being grounded in my own culture and values, I am sure of myself and this helps me to deal with injustices.

Another aspect of leadership as a woman is that, sometimes, I have had to deal with sexism. Whether it's the district staff, school staff, or parents, I question if they would have talked to me in a particular way if I was a man. Condescending and dismissive attitudes and behaviours have at times gotten in the way of dealing with the real issues. I would sometimes have to be very direct and say to the person, "you are being very condescending to me right now", and ask them to instead tell me about the actual issue at hand. Gender and race often get mixed up in issues, and we can easily get lost. Being honest and forthright has helped me navigate the difficult times.

I highly recommend that women from diverse backgrounds pursue a leadership role at the school and district levels and beyond. My own career path has been very interesting and satisfying. We need more role models for children, as well as for our staff. When districts talk of equity, diversity, and inclusion, they need to walk the talk. It shows in their hiring practices.

We need diverse women in various leadership roles. For me, the road to leadership has not been easy. I have faced additional roadblocks and struggles because I am a woman, and I am not white. Being comfortable and accepting of your own identity really helps when navigating conflicts. I know who I am, and I am glad to share parts of my culture and beliefs with people who are curious and want to know more. Because race and gender issues can be enmeshed with the problems leaders deal with, it can be difficult to tease out the real issues. With more women of diverse backgrounds in positions of power and influence, I think that there could be positive changes to equity, diversity, and inclusion in the school system going forward.



“Most of the time, I am not conscious of being a diverse woman in leadership.

Sometimes, though, I am reminded of my difference in abrupt and often unpleasant ways.”

Ji-Ai Cho



Navshina Savory is District Principal
of Equity and Inclusion
in Richmond, BC (SD 38)
and a BCPVPA Board Director

Navshina

we engaged in all of our extracurricular sports and club activities, and most of our social experiences. As adolescents, school was a very positive place for all of us. Becoming an educator was easy, and my positive experiences in school helped me to imagine creating that same safe space for others in my care. I must also have a genetic predisposition to teaching: my mom was a teacher in our country of origin – Tanzania, Africa – and both of my siblings are also administrators.

Early in my teaching career, it felt natural for me to pursue leadership opportunities. This is probably in part due to my personality, and in part due to my desire to have an impact. I recognized early in my classroom teaching days that school-based leaders have an incredible opportunity to create cultures that have a significant influence on the lives of both staff and kids. Seeing this in the work of excellent educational leaders, and in seeking their mentorship, I was drawn to leadership. Back in the late 1990s, I was also acutely aware of the lack of representation of women and – specifically – women of colour in secondary administration. This did not seem right to me, as I knew I could do the job. I wanted the opportunity to have a positive influence beyond those students in my classroom, at a systemic level that would impact students directly and globally. This is when my path in educational leadership began. I obtained a master's degree in Educational Leadership, and actively pursued a formal position as a school-based administrator; I have never looked back. In 1999, unknowingly and not deliberately, I become the first South Asian secondary administrator in the Surrey School District. I have always been proud that I was a 'trailblazer' in my career. Thankfully, we have come

Growing up, I loved school. It wasn't so much for the 'academics', but more for the extracurricular opportunities that were offered, and the friendships I made at school both as a new settler and an adolescent. During my formal schooling years, school was – for the most part – a place where I felt truly happy. I had very kind teachers who were extremely encouraging and supportive. This provided me with a sense of belonging and a feeling that schools are safe, inviting, and fun places where I could learn new things. My immigrant family did not have extra money or the wherewithal to enroll my siblings and me in afterschool activities. Therefore, our schools were not only traditional learning places, but the places where

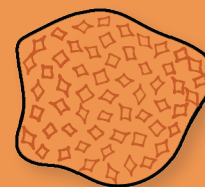
a long way, and the trail is now much clearer for other women of colour at all levels of public education.

I am grateful that, throughout my career, I have not faced significant challenges that were apparent to me at the time. We all face challenges, but rather than being held back – and, possibly subconsciously, as a survival strategy – I have focused on my own inherent privilege. This includes access to education, the ability to navigate the English language and, most importantly, the presence of a solid family that provides love and support in every circumstance, most especially during those times that required resilience. Rather than putting a focus on the challenges, this outlook has allowed me to leverage those privileges to achieve my own goals. Having said this, perhaps the biggest challenge I have faced is my own internal challenge of having ‘Imposter Syndrome’. You see, people that look like me should not be secondary school Principals. Growing up, I had no role models, no examples, and nothing to represent how the job of leading a school is done by someone with my skin colour, intersecting with my gender. In my reflection on this self-doubt, and through a lack of models to follow, I believe that I have been driven to work harder and to work with humility, allowing me to focus on students and what is best for them. This focus has never failed me; it has, in fact, provided much-needed clarity in navigating the complexity of leadership.

If I were to give advice to women of diverse backgrounds who are interested in pursuing a leadership role, I would say... “Just do it”. There is nothing more joyful, hopeful, and significantly impactful for our young future leaders than the empowerment that school leadership can provide. As examples and connections to students, school leaders have a profound ability to change the lives and trajectories of young people’s futures. As you pursue your leadership in education, always lead with the values to which you have a deep commitment. Do this with humility, integrity, and authenticity, and

these values will provide balance and calm in an otherwise hectic career. Every decision – and there will be a lot of decisions you will make as an educational leader — becomes so much clearer when the intention is in the best interest of students. Be kind, show respect to everyone, work hard, and always focus on relationships; the rest is simply background noise. Finally, remember that you are an example and a role model for many equity-seeking groups. Your ‘minority status’ holds great value in creating a more equitable society and school system. This is your privilege: use it to make things better for those in your care.

We are immensely grateful to the authors of this article, and humbled by their candour and generosity in sharing their stories.



“I simply wanted the opportunity to have a positive influence at a systemic level that would impact students directly and more globally, not just those students in my classroom. This is when my path in educational leadership began.”

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