

BREAKING BARR

BY JUDY OWEN

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Should I try to dull my accent in order to get a job? Should I wear my sari to a job interview?

Those are some of the questions members of The Educators of Colour Network ask when discussing Manitoba's education system.

The answers aren't always cut and dry, but the fact those questions crop up is one reason why the non-profit organization is a valuable resource for all educators.

"We are a broader community and we're all responsible for whether or not we want to create a more welcoming face of education within our school systems," said network founder Michelle Jean-Paul, principal of École Belmont in the Seven Oaks School Division.

The network started in the fall of 2008 and membership is free and open to anyone with an interest in diversity in educators. Its mandate is to provide high-quality professional development, including for substitute teachers who may not have access to professional development offered to full-time teachers.

About two free events are held each year on topics suggested by its 130 members. Workshops have been about assessment, technology, the hiring process, supporting English as an Additional Language learners and understanding how to support students from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

The next event is January 19, 2015, at the Louis Riel School Division's board office (4:30–6:30 p.m.). Anyone interested in attending is asked to email educatorsofcolour@gmail.com to help with a head count.

A panel of representatives from Winnipeg School Divisions will talk about hiring practices.

"A lot of our members feel that there are barriers to employment and so they're very interested in the interview process and the hiring process," Jean-Paul said.

She's one of the network's four leaders, which include Sherry Jones from the Winnipeg School Division, Jason Pinder from Seven Oaks and Cynthia Taylor from Louis Riel. Duane Brothers, superintendent of Louis Riel, is a consultant and mentor.

Jean-Paul was born in Manitoba, but her father came from Haiti in 1970 during an influx of black Caribbean educators who had to re-certify. She

grew up listening to stories about the challenges they faced and they became her mentors.

She co-ordinates informal mentorships between network members and administrators "who are going to be frank and earnest" in terms of what members need to improve on.

When questions arise about clothing or accents, the reality is those can be factors in getting a job, but not always, she said.

"Maybe it's not a question of their accent or the fact that they're wearing cultural clothing, but if they perceive it to be, that can become a barrier to engaging with the system and feeling that there's a place for them in the education system."

Members aren't told to conform.

"That's not what we believe," Jean-Paul said. "We want people to think, 'OK, do you feel as though that's the avenue that you want to take to get the job?'"

"At the end of the day, we want people to be maintaining their own personal integrity."

Jean-Paul taught five years at École Sacré-Coeur and moved on to become Garden Grove School's vice-principal for two years. She was also vice-principal at Garden City Collegiate for three years and is in her second year as École Belmont's principal.

She'll never forget when she got her first administrative appointment.

"A colleague of mine that I was working with at the time said, 'You know why you got the job?' I said, 'Why would that be?' She said, 'Well, the colour of your skin,'" Jean-Paul recalled.

The comments were surprising, and yet not surprising.

"It's been my experience that with each advancement in my career, there has been at least one person who has tried to imply that I was successful because of my cultural heritage."

Jones has taught for 10 years at Garden Grove and has been a term vice-principal at the school.

She's from a mixed race background and admitted she sometimes felt confused about where her place was. A new generation of kids may have the same experiences and

that's one of the reasons why she believes it's important educators come from diverse backgrounds.

Feedback about the network's benefits has been positive.

"It's not just the members who come," Jones said. "It's us as leadership, it's the guests we invite to come and speak."

"Everybody speaks so highly about just being in that environment and being able to have the conversations. That's the most valuable part."

The Educators of Colour Network leader Sherry Jones (left) and founder Michelle Jean-Paul. Photo by Judy Owen.

