

The Branch – Teaching Guide

About the Book

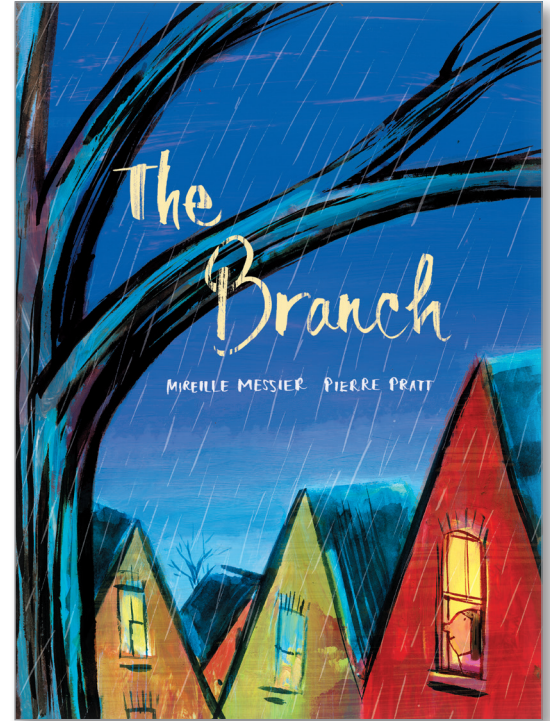
When an ice storm snaps a small girl's favorite branch from the tree in her yard, she's crestfallen. The girl's mom says it's just a branch. But not to her! "That was the branch I sat on, jumped from, played under. It was my castle, my spy base, my ship . . ." Luckily, her neighbor Mr. Frank understands. He says the branch has "potential." "What's potential?" she asks. "It means it's worth keeping." And so, with imagination and spirit, and Mr. Frank's guidance and tools, the girl transforms the broken branch into something whole and new, giving it another purpose, and her another place to treasure.

About the Author

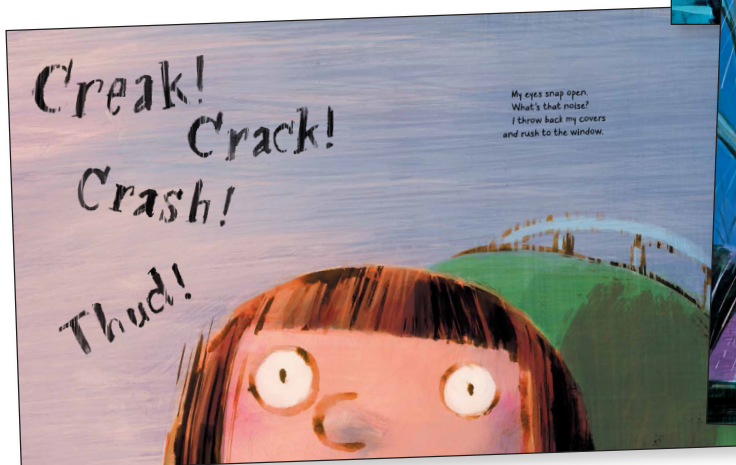
MIREILLE MESSIER is a Montreal-born, Ottawa-raised and now Toronto-based children's writer with a background in broadcasting and theater. Before becoming an author, Mireille worked as a television and radio host, a director, a researcher, a book reviewer and a voice actress. Sometimes, she still does those things, too. One of her first "literary" jobs was writing jokes for the bottom of pudding lids! Since the launch of her first book in 2003, Mireille has published over twenty books.

About the Illustrator

PIERRE PRATT is the internationally acclaimed, award-winning illustrator of over fifty books for children. He has won several prizes, including three Governor General's Awards, a Totem at the Montreuil Salon du Livre in France, the UNICEF Prize in Bologna, the Boston Globe Horn Book Award, the Elizabeth Cleaver Prize, the Mr. Christie Book Award and the TD Children's Literature Award. He lives and works in Montreal, Quebec, and in Lisbon, Portugal.



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Overview

In *The Branch*, a young girl experiences loss and sadness when something important to her is destroyed. She must find a way to deal with these emotions — a challenge all children face at some point. The lessons in this teaching guide are designed to enhance a child’s ability to deal with challenging emotions, as well as think about the “potential” of each difficult situation, similar to the main character in the story.

	Grades	Theme	High-Yield Strategies
Activity 1	1 to 3	Mindful Listening: <i>Using Mindfulness to Build Resilience, Decrease Anxiety and Self Regulate</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identifying similarities and differences• Cooperative Learning• Nonlinguistic representations
Activity 2	4 to 8	The Tree of Life: <i>Thinking about Identity, Strength and the Future</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Comparing and contrasting• Higher-order thinking• Nonlinguistic representations• Cooperative Learning• Reinforcing effort and providing recognition
Activity 3	4 to 8	Finding Potential: <i>Building Something New</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cooperative Learning• Nonlinguistic representations• Identifying similarities and differences• Cooperative Learning• Higher-order thinking• Reinforcing effort and providing recognition• Generating and testing hypotheses

Activity 1: Mindful Listening

Before starting this activity, review the Guiding Questions on the last page of this guide.

MATERIALS

- *The Branch*
- Chart paper or board
- A simple image of the brain
- Beanbag chairs or something comfortable to sit on
- Natural sounds, soft music or another form of sound

OVERVIEW

This activity is designed to help children engage in mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present and aware of one’s surroundings, and therefore less likely to overreact or become overwhelmed. Research suggests that when children engage in mindfulness they build their resilience to stress, increase their self-regulation skills and improve their ability to be more attentive. Practicing mindfulness and other relaxation techniques will benefit all children, with a higher level of impact on students who struggle with anxiety.

LEARNING GOAL

Students will learn about their brains in order to better understand why mindfulness is important. Children will also sit still while quietly listening to sounds with the goal of focusing on specific sounds and identifying the source of these sounds. **Note to Educator:** It is important to post learning goal(s) in child-friendly language so that children can both know and articulate the focus of their learning.

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ACTIVITY

1. Review the last page of this resource.
2. Show students the cover of *The Branch*. Ask students what they think the story is about. **Note to Educator:** This will allow students to share thoughts, make predictions and make connections. This is one way to activate prior knowledge and allow interest in the book to grow.
3. Tell students you are going to read *The Branch*. **Note to Educator:** Depending on the age of your students, you may want to have a deeper conversation about the story's key words: "loss," "hope" and "potential."
4. Read the first nine pages of *The Branch*, up to the page when the little girl discovers her branch has fallen.
5. Ask students if they can think of a time when they felt sad because something outside of their control happened.
6. Ask students to describe feelings that they might have had and record those feelings on chart paper/board so children can see words like "sad," "mad," "scared," etc. **Note to Educator:** It is important to normalize these feelings.
7. Depending on your group you may want to ask students how they dealt with these feelings and/or how they could (or did) turn this difficult experience into a positive one.
8. Read the rest of the book.

ACTION

1. Talk to students about the brain (use a simple visual from the internet: http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/mindup/pdfs/MindUP_K-2_Sample_Poster.pdf). Teach students about a few key parts of the brain: the amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, for example. **Note to Educator:** You may want to frame the parts of the brain as "friends." The main point here is to help students understand that their brain is made up of brain friends called amygdala, hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex. Just like their real friends, their brain friends can help them in all sorts of situations. These brain friends give them the power to calm down, learn better and remember.
2. Talk to students about the hippocampus as being the friend who remembers everything, the prefrontal cortex as the friend who helps them make good decisions and the amygdala as the friend who protects them when it thinks they need help. Explain to students that sometimes when a problem arises, the amygdala feels threatened and reacts without thinking. This means that it forgets to "speak" to the prefrontal cortex and doesn't make the best decisions. Stopping to relax, focus and/or breathe gives the amygdala and prefrontal cortex time to think and make the best decision. **Note to Educator:** Depending on your group, you may want students to engage in a few skits with the amygdala and prefrontal cortex as the main "characters" so they gain a better understanding of the two.
3. Ask students to tell you about a time they didn't make a good decision because their brain friends didn't speak to each other.
4. Explain to students that the activity they are going to engage in is called "Mindfulness" and teaches us to give our brains time to think.
5. Bring the students to a quiet but familiar place such as a classroom or a garden; alternatively, you may choose to play music for students to listen to.
6. Have students sit comfortably. **Note to Educator:** Depending on your location and resources, you may want to use yoga mats or something similar.
7. Ask students to breathe in through their noses and out through their mouths a few times, all the while listening to their own breathing. **Note to Educator:** With older students in grades 2 or 3, you may want to ask them to breathe in and out ten times. For younger students, you may want to skip this step.
8. Ask students to close their eyes and listen to all the sounds around them. You may want to prompt students by asking them to find sounds they haven't really heard or focused on before.
9. Ask students to open their eyes (the amount of time their eyes are closed can range from fifteen seconds to one minute, depending on the age and group). **Note to Educator:** Like with any new skill, as students practice they will be able to sit still and listen for longer periods of time.
10. As a whole class or in small groups, have students discuss all of the things that they heard.

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CONSOLIDATION

1. Ask students to draw a picture and write an accompanying sentence about a sound they heard that they hadn't noticed before.
2. Ask students to classify all of the things they heard. **Note to Educator:** You may want to provide categories depending on what you chose to listen to.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Make engaging in a breathing activity part of your daily routine.
2. Engage in mindful listening as a daily practice.
3. Produce posters or a “sentence wall” with examples of mindful versus non-mindful actions.

Activity 2: The Tree of Life

Before starting this activity, review the Guiding Questions on the last page of this guide.

MATERIALS

- *The Branch*
- Materials to construct a tree (paper, pencil crayons, etc.)

OVERVIEW

This activity is used all over the world as a way of thinking about identity through story. Children will use a tree as a visual metaphor of the different factors that impact who they are, through which they will examine the potential that exists for their futures.

“The Tree of Life is a hopeful and inspiring approach to working with children, young people and adults who have experienced hard times. This methodology was co-developed through a partnership between REPSSI (www.repssi.org) and the Dulwich Centre Foundation. Ncazelo Ncube (REPSSI) and David Denborough (Dulwich Centre Foundation) initially developed this Tree of Life approach to assist colleagues who work with children affected by HIV/AIDS in southern Africa.” (<http://dulwichcentre.com.au/the-tree-of-life/>)

LEARNING GOAL

Students will create a visual image of the many aspects of a tree. Their sketch will include the roots, the ground, the trunk, the branches, the leaves and fruit. Each of these elements will represent various parts of the child's identity, such as their skills, values, support systems, hopes and dreams. Through labeling these parts children will consider factors that influence who they are and begin to intentionally shape who they want to be moving forward. **Note to Educator:** It is important to post learning goal(s) in child-friendly language so that children can both know and articulate the focus of their learning.

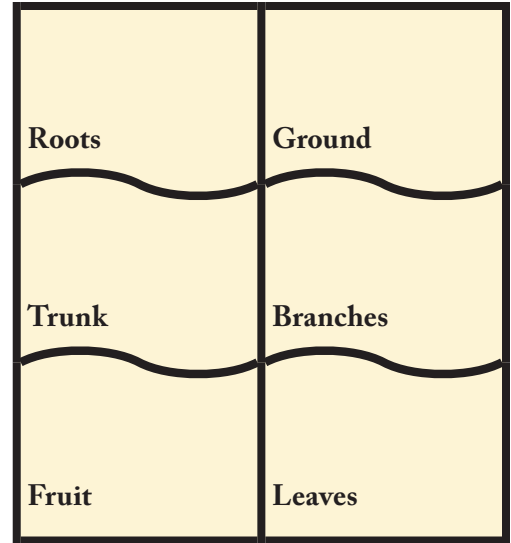
ACTIVITY

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3. Tell students you are going to read *The Branch*, a story about a girl who experiences loss, finds hope and sees potential in something she never saw before. **Note to Educator:** Depending on the age group of your students you may want to have a deeper conversation about the key words “loss,” “hope” and “potential.”
4. Read *The Branch*.

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ACTION

1. Have students sit in groups of four. **Note to Educator:** Students will be sharing personal information and feelings; it is important to carefully construct these groups and speak with students about respect.
2. Ask students what part of the tree in *The Branch* prevented the entire tree from falling down? **Note to Educator:** After hearing their ideas, if it didn't emerge, discuss the fact that the roots kept the tree firmly in place.
3. Provide students with a chart to record ideas prior to drawing. **Note to Educator:** You may want students to record in all areas first, prior to drawing, or record in one area then draw that area.
4. **The Roots:** In groups, ask students to discuss where they were born, important family history, how they were named, etc. Ask students to draw the roots of the tree. Explain to the students that similar to the roots of the tree in *The Branch*, their roots help to keep them firmly grounded and strong. Ask students to label where they were born, their family history, culture and how they were named, etc.
5. **The Ground:** In groups, ask students to discuss where they live, things they do with their family and some of the activities that they regularly enjoy. Ask students to label their ground.
6. Ask students to draw the ground that surrounds their tree. Explain to students that the ground is the world around them. Ask students to label the ground around their tree.
7. **The Trunk:** In groups, ask students to discuss their skills. **Note to Educator:** You may need to structure this part as students often have difficulty identifying their own skills. Prior to this step you may want to engage in an initial group brainstorm.
8. Ask students to draw the trunk of their tree. Explain to students that similar to any tree, the formation of a trunk is a process that takes a long time to happen. There are skills they will continue to develop that will enable them to reach any goal. Ask students to label their trunk.
9. **The Branches:** In groups, ask students to discuss their hopes, wishes, dreams and ideas of what they want to do with their life.
10. Ask students to draw the branches of their tree. Explain to students that similar to any tree, there are many branches that represent many different hopes, wishes and dreams. Ask students to label their branches.
11. **The Leaves:** Ask students to discuss the people who are important to them. **Note to Educator:** These could be people they see every day and feel close to or they might be people they see on occasion. They could also be people who they used to be involved with. You may want to create an initial brainstorm before children begin to discuss.
12. Ask students to draw the leaves of their tree and label them.
13. **The Fruits:** Ask students to discuss the gifts that they have (not necessarily material gifts, but things such as friendship and acts of kindness). **Note to Educator:** You may want to do an initial brainstorm.
14. Ask students to draw their fruits and label them.



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CONSOLIDATION

Choose one or two of the following:

1. Ask students to create a monologue from the perspective of one part of their tree.
2. Ask students to create a skit about a problem that is resolved through using various aspects of their tree.
3. Ask students to record a journal entry about a challenging situation and how they might use all parts of their tree to solve the problem.

Activity 3: Finding Potential

Build It...

MATERIALS

- *The Branch*
- Materials for their design or Plasticine/clay

OVERVIEW

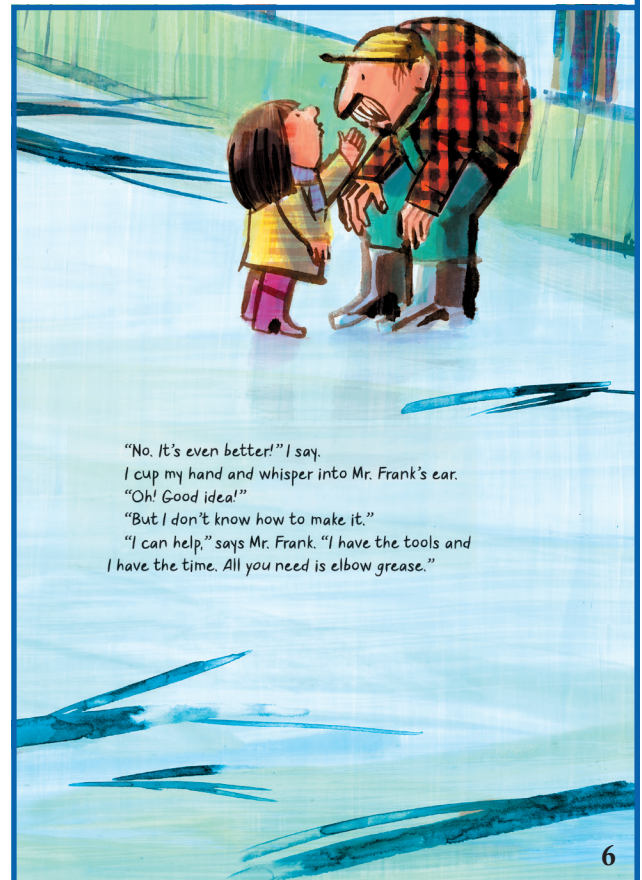
In this activity students will have an opportunity to engage with the engineering design process and build something meaningful out of an item(s) that is perceived as “garbage.”

LEARNING GOAL

Students will look at their “garbage” (or Plasticine/clay) and think about what it could become. Students will then create a design, build a prototype and analyze their model. As an extension, students will modify their design based on the constructive feedback of staff and other students. **Note to Educator:** It is important to post learning goal(s) in child-friendly language so that children can both know and articulate the focus of their learning.

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3. Tell students you are going to read *The Branch*, a story about a girl who experiences loss, finds hope and sees potential in something she never saw before. **Note to Educator:** Depending on the age group of your students you may want to have a deeper conversation about the key words “loss,” “hope” and “potential.”
4. Read up to page 22 of *The Branch*.
5. Ask students to think about what they would make if it were their branch and why. **Note to Educator:** You may want to have students record a journal entry.
6. Read the rest of the book.



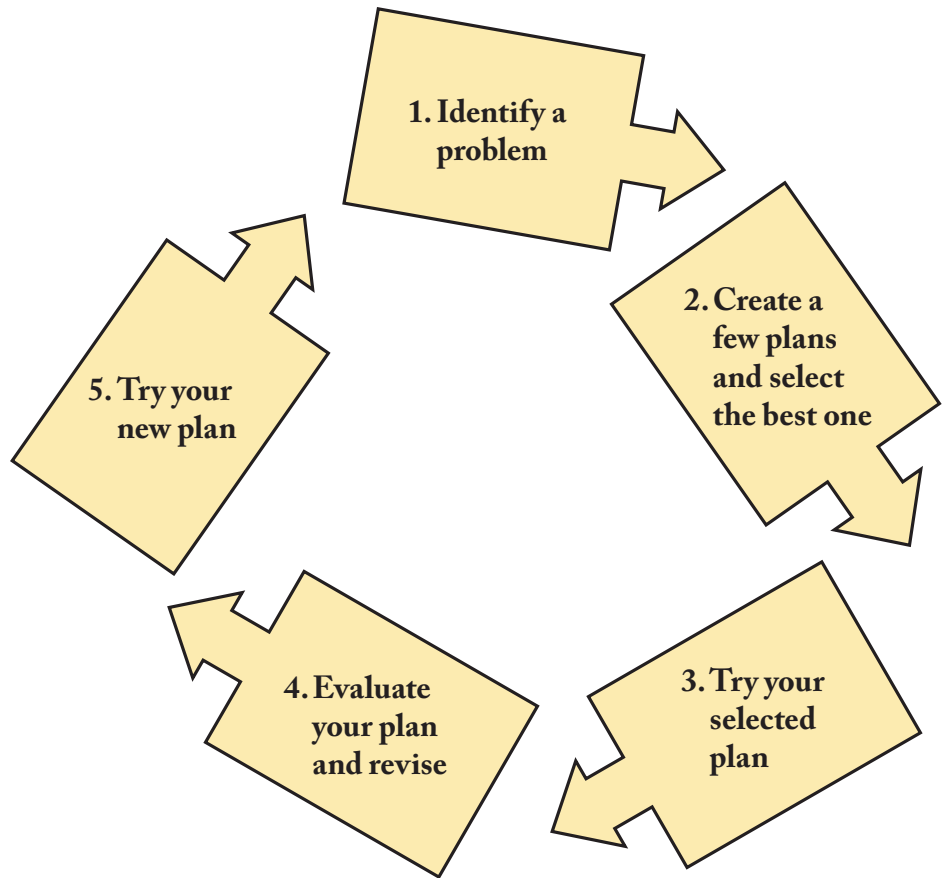
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ACTION

1. Have students discuss how the girl in *The Branch* created something meaningful out of the broken branch.
2. Place students in groups of three to five.
3. Ask students to bring an item(s) from home that no longer has value.

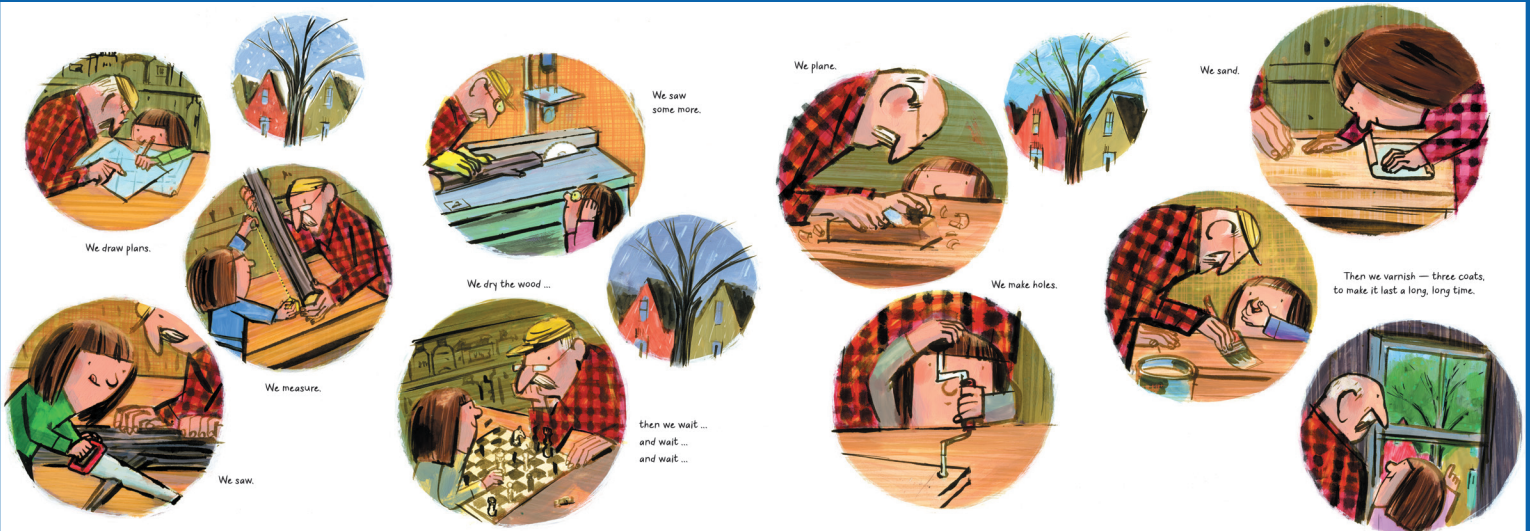
Note to Educator: Depending on the age of your students, you may want to place some parameters on the items or simply provide Plasticine or clay.

4. Once students have their items (or Plasticine/clay) it is time for them to think and create an item of their choice.



CONSOLIDATION

1. Once students have built their model, complete stages 4 and 5 in the graphic above.
2. Ask students to review their initial design.
3. Give students an opportunity to share their observations and, more specifically, what they learned as they created their model.
4. Have students analyze their learning and discuss what they would do differently if they were to build this model again. **Note to Educator:** This is a key component of the lesson. This is where students will challenge their own thinking and critically come up with different ideas. This is what an engineer does!
5. Give students an opportunity to record and share their learning, including how they might build this model differently if given the opportunity.



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Why Use This Teaching Guide?

This resource strives to support educators who want to give students the tools to critically read the world. It embraces a *critical pedagogy* that engages dialogue with students about how social, political and economic factors impact them and others. Through the activities provided, educators will empower and support students to challenge social inequities and create a better world.

This resource uses high-yield instructional strategies (e.g., making comparisons, cooperative learning, reinforcing effort, etc.) as a tool to increase students' skill sets and create a platform for relevant inquiries. Literature has the power to engage children and promote imagination, and it can also maintain stereotypes or interrupt them. This resource aims to offer young people the opportunity to think critically and to problem-solve — life skills that will equip them to navigate various life circumstances.

GUIDING QUESTIONS WHEN USING PICTURE BOOKS

	Questions to think about PRIOR to using a picture book	Questions to plan for PRIOR to the activity
Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you know your own biases?• Do you know what stereotypes and biases are present in the book?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How are you prepared to challenge the stereotypes and biases in the book?
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who will connect most with the images in the book?• Who will connect most with the content and themes in the book?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can you support all students to make a personal and meaningful connection to the book?
Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Whose voices are present?• Whose voices are missing?• Who has the power and privilege? (Think in terms of gender, race, ability, economic class, religion, etc.)• What is the historical context of the book?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can you include the missing voice?• How can you address issues of power and privilege?• How can you contextualize the book?
Social Action and Challenging Inequity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can issues of social justice be taken up through the use of this book? (Every book has an avenue where we can consider issues of social justice. For example, if the book is set in a middle-class community, what are some of the injustices for those who do not live in a middle-class community?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can you help students to think about taking action that is meaningful to them (i.e., older students have more playscape time, the absence of a community center in the neighborhood, factors that cause poverty in the community/other countries)?• How can you equip students to take action against inequities?

RESOURCES USED IN *THE BRANCH* TEACHING GUIDE

Ontario Ministry of Education. “Supporting Minds: An Educator’s Guide to Promoting Students’ Mental Health and Well-being,” 2013. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/SupportingMinds.pdf>

The Hawn Foundation, *The MindUP Curriculum Grades PreK-2: Brain-Focused Strategies for Learning and Living*. Scholastic Inc., March 2011.

Marzano, Robert J., Debra J. Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock. *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001.