Shaking the Movers 2018 Ottawa: Children’s Rights and Discrimination

On November 17th, 2018 at the Vanier Community Centre in Ottawa, a small group of 12-17 year olds gathered to discuss the theme of children’s rights and discrimination. In keeping with the Shaking the Mover’s Model, no one over the age of 30 was present when young people explored and discussed their views on the day’s subject.

One of the most important take-a-ways from this workshop was the necessity of creating a safe and welcoming environment. Such a space was created through a variety of activities. To begin, all participants were asked to position themselves—sharing where they are from, what their interests are, and what brought them to the event that day. Another activity for creating a friendly, open, and inclusive space was a version of “getting to know you BINGO” for which participants wandered around the room, engaged in conversation with others, and learned more about each other. It was also crucial that it be clear to all the participants from the beginning that no one would be forced to share anything they did not feel comfortable with. With this foundation in place, in just a few short hours, young people connected and revealed personal insights from their own experiences of discrimination as well as the many forms of exclusion they have witnessed.

The next section of the day involved diving into material on general rights broadly. Participants were invited to participate in activities such as “Rights Charades” and “Draw in Right” for which young people used art and physical motion to explore the meanings of various rights in the CRC. The experience was powerful. In one case, a young person revealed: “I didn’t know about my rights. I thought that if you want to know your rights, it’s your job to find out, but actually, I have the right for someone to teach me about them.”

Another activity associated with learning about rights was “If I had a super power.” In this activity, young people were asked to think of the capabilities associated with each right. Then, each person went around the circle and said what super power they would use to help children around the world know about their rights and have those rights respected.

In the afternoon, the schedule for STM Ottawa was divided into thematic areas. The first of these topics was identity and discrimination. The most poignant exercise in this theme area was when participants were asked to write on sticky notes the words they believe people associate with them that they feel are not true. On another set of sticky notes, participants were then asked to write the words that they would use to describe themselves. The final result was a powerful representation of what qualities are missed when people are discriminated against by others. Following this activity, the participants engaged in a thoughtful discussion on the various barriers to identity and in particular the role of the media in shaping social norms. Participants also described the tendency for minorities to remain absent in media representation. As one
participant articulated, “all my friends have a superhero of their background on TV and I have no one.”

The next thematic area was economic discrimination. In this section, participants were asked to think about what economic discrimination might look like. Next, time was spent thinking of examples of discrimination and linking these examples to violations of various articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. For example, participants noted that someone abused in their childhood might have PTSD/chronic breakdowns; without the proper supports in place, this person may not be able to easily hold down a job. Another participant spoke from their own experience of a teacher refusing to give them notes after they had missed a class. Rather than acknowledging that this student suffers from a serious mental illness, the teacher assumed that the student had “decided to stay home” and therefore did not “deserve” notes. Participants discussed how such a move on the part of the teacher infringed on this young person’s right to an education and could hurt future employment prospects.

The final thematic area of the day focused on discrimination at school. This area affirmed a number of topics that had been previously discussed in the theme of discrimination and identity. Participants stressed the frustration they feel when they never, or rarely, see themselves reflected in school content and the broader culture. As a result, participants called for their backgrounds and cultures to be reflected in school culture as well as for school policies and environments that value their presence. In one example, a participant described a time when she was not allowed to audition for the lead in a school play because she was told the role was a “white role.” In another example, one participant, who had recently immigrated to Canada, described an experience when she was told “not to bother trying to go to university” because the teacher viewed the fact that she was an English language learner too high of an obstacle for this young person to overcome. Rather than supporting the ambitions of this young person to become a nurse, the teach chose to rest on discriminating stereotypes. Clearly, schools can be places where discrimination is profound. To focus on the positives, the next part of the discrimination and schools workshop had students imagine what quality education would look like. Suggestions included: having an empathetic counsellor you can go to in difficult times; teacher support of students; adaptable education; giving everyone access to the tools they need to succeed; not waking up early; a place where people are judged by their actions and not their appearances; and knowing that they would be respected.

The workshop ended with the creation of spoken word poems. The activity was a valuable reminder of the importance of the arts in expression, in meaningful engagement, in connection with others, and in creative problem solving. These poems highlight the pain of discrimination and also have glimpses of hope for a future in which all children’s rights are respected.

The 2018 Ottawa Shaking the Movers left little doubt of the value of the voices of young people. In closing, consider the reminder of one young person:

I’m not a future leader; I’m a leader now…Adults will always say you’ll be something in the future.

I’m someone now.