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“Les professeurs perpétuent les inégalités » and “some police officers use our colour as a weapon »: Young people’s perspectives on othering & discrimination in social institutions

Across STM sites, children comment on discrimination in school and by neighborhood and transportation and the police. In Ottawa, discrimination in the workplace was also raised, although it seemed less directed to young people. In school settings, STM participants complained of some rules [seemingly related to limits to freedom of expression?] which are intended to protect young people yet are rather perceived by them as a restriction: “les règles nous empêchent de nous exprimer au lieu de nous protéger.”

Some young people from a low-income neighborhood felt closely monitored by the police (“notre école est tellement jugée par le fait qu’on est défavorisé et qu’on est jeunes que la police traîne toujours autour »). Being stopped by officers from the Société de transport de Montréal [public transportation] and the municipal police because of skin colour (particularly Black) was also denounced: “Some police officers, they use colour as a weapon. If we are Black, they think that we have a weapon. If we are Black, we are the weapon. So they come and attack us” and “we want the police to act the same way as they act with White people”, said young people in Montreal. These remarks were frequent among ethnic minority and migrant youth.

The recommendation that teachers and police are recruited among a diverse pool of candidates and are provided ongoing intercultural training, including awareness of their own views/biases, to better understand diversity issues ensues these concerns and should extend to and ALL professionals dealing with families:

I think police officers should also be taught about racism. If you’re trying to be a police officer, you cannot have any bias opinions. It’s so messed up. If you arrest someone just because of their colour, get out we don’t want you.

Similarly, teachers’ ignorance is said to turn schools into “unsafe spaces” and, as a result, young people called for teachers to learn about “what goes on behind the scene in their students’ lives”. After all, as participants in BC indicated, “we don’t fully respect it [cultures] unless we know the backgrounds and traditions.” This resonates with the views of migration researchers and professionals with whom I regularly work.

Physical appearance (e.g., “je mets des boucles d’oreille et un jour (…) dans le métro et j’ai trouvé que le monde me regardait (…) comme si j’étais une mauvaise personne »), skin color, age,… Sometimes make others “changer de trottoir”.

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1 Supportive teachers were also identified: “For field trips, sometimes teachers will pay for the trips out of their pockets for students who can’t afford it but that depends on the school.”

2 Expression used in the context of adults distrusting groups of adolescents in Montreal: ‘Quand on est avec notre gang d’amis, un groupe d’adolescents: ‘Ah, ils vont nous voler, ils vont nous battre, et ils changent de trottoir.’
impossible to hide; others, young people develop ways to manage (e.g., changing or covering school uniform at Dollarama store to avoid being followed by security guards). Sometimes, the -isms are internalized in such a way that children themselves feel inadequate (“Playing football, I was the only Asian so I felt like I shouldn’t be there”, STM Toronto). Moreover, I was stricken by a pejorative use of the term “child” by children themselves!: “We are always told that we need to be in charge of our future, but when we try, we are treated like children” (STM Toronto).

Maybe as a result of how recruitment was done, discrimination by service providers and institutions other than in education and security was not raised. Nonetheless, in studies I have carried out with families (including children and parents) and professionals, institutional discrimination in health, education, child welfare, and security contexts are common occurrence. Over the last three years, for example, I have been leading a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada-funded project in Quebec called “Geographies of Care: Professionals, Caregivers, and Children’s Views of (In)adequate Supervision Across Cultures”. The purpose of the study is to develop a better understanding of caregivers, children, and professionals’ views on (in)adequate supervision across diverse cultural and socioeconomic groups in Quebec and the extent to which professionals’ assessment of lack of supervision reflects diverse cultural norms. The study responds to concerns over the prevalence of (a) neglect as the most common type of maltreatment (34% of substantiated investigations) and lack of supervision as the most common type of neglect in Canada (44%) [1] [2]; and (b) the chronic overrepresentation of ethnic minority [3], and particularly Aboriginal families in child neglect investigations in the country. Fears have been raised that unsubstantiated investigations of neglect involving ethnic minority families reflect professionals’ prejudices and many result in stigmatization of these communities [4].

To achieve the study objectives, we held focus group discussions (FGD) with over 100 young people (ages 12-17 years) and parents from different ethnicultural groups (namely, Latin-American, Afro-Caribbean, South Asian, Franco-Quebecois, and First Nations), as well as more than 50 professionals from schools, youth protection, police, and health and social services in Quebec. FGD explored child supervision beliefs and practices in their country of origin/in Quebec or during their childhood and now, as well as child supervision challenges and consequences. Perspectives of adults and children, families and service providers are rich and diverse. Issues of racial profiling and discrimination were denounced by many families. For example, both parents and young people shared concern over how quick neighbors were to call the police when they observed caregiving practices that did not conform the Canadian norm. The lack of community support denounced by migrant families was such that some parents expressed appreciation for being referred to the Directorate of Youth Protection because that is “the only way you’re gonna get help from somebody”!

Perceptions of safety varied, across participants and groups, and young people shared concern that their parents do not really know what is going on at school. One child from Latin America explained how parents often don’t know what happens all day at school (including incidents of
bullying) so parents “still think that it is safe.” Creating safe spaces for dialogue at school and at home, should therefore be a priority moving forward.

As for professionals, sometimes they asked whether they were to respond “from a professional perspective” or “from a parent’s perspective”, thus revealing holding some sort of double standards (e.g., re. their own children and other families’ children, or with aboriginal and ethno-cultural families (racial profiling?)). The extent to which profession shapes their stance, times have changed, or it is just easier to assess a known situation is unclear.

I concur with STM participants that “diversity is a gift” and it “means being kind to everyone no matter what they look like” (STM BC). Indeed, the world needs more kindness.

And you calling me colored?

When I born, I black
When I grow up, I black
When I go in Sun, I black
When I scared, I black
When I sick, I black
And when I die, I still black

And you white fellow
When you born, you pink
When you grow up, you white
When you go in sun, you red
When you cold, you blue
When you scared, you yellow
When you sick, you green
And when you die, you gray

And you calling me colored?


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3 This poem was allegedly written by an African child and nominated by the United Nations as the best poem of 2006. Source and award could not be verified.