

A Social Justice Data Analysis from McNally High School Student Focus Groups

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Context

McNally High School is a school that serves approximately 900 students with roughly 50 staff. It is located in Edmonton, Alberta, and many teachers and students of colour call it home. Many McNally High students experience racism, which can lead to a disconnect and sap a student's will to learn. Both direct and indirect encounters with various forms of interpersonal racism can be considered in racialized trauma (Use of false information, negative stereotypes about people of different races, and remember that interpersonal racism is frequently concealed and is not always obvious). In our generation, it is uncommon for teachers to discuss racism with students in the classroom which has also been occurring for ages. The McNally community wants to keep thriving, but in order for us to do so, we need to improve our environment and educate people about the racism that still exists behind school walls.

Focus

The major goal of this project was to link students of colour in the McNally community to talk about the issues that are now and have historically existed at the school that deals with racism. We did this by providing information and a database of the data we had gathered from our focus group. Many of the students who took part in this focus group found that discussing the problems at McNally opened their eyes to how urgent action was necessary. When they learned that many students were subject to vicious acts of racism and that nothing had been done to stop it, people's perspectives were changed. This was not treated lightly at all by the students. Following that, it sparked a discussion among educators and students on how we may improve EPSB schools in Edmonton's response to racism. Students agreed to meet monthly in focus groups on various topics (the first meeting focused on Microaggressions). After each meeting, notes were shared to offer recommendations to the Principal, with names and personal information removed to encourage an open conversation. This initiative intends to continue throughout the year.

Findings and Interpretations

In addition to in person questions, a form was shared asking about experiences with racism. Among the questions asked, the most important question was “What work do you think needs to be done?” with the following results:

- “make everyone feel more included by promoting diversity
- the school needs to address the situation more publicly rather than keeping it a secret to the students
- I think awareness and people coming forward to talk about their experiences. Mostly just educating people on what racism is and micro aggressions and the history behind them. Having a focus group and talking about these issues can also be very helpful and eye opening. Maybe also more of a representation of poc’s in the school system itself.
- Teachers need to start believing students when they come to them with things like this and also punish the students who are at fault instead of letting them off the hook constantly
- better education and better actions being done to those who say or do racist things
- more racial awareness
- talk to the students who partake in that behaviour”

The subject of racism is rarely broached in our classroom. Although there is a lot of diversity at our school, racism still exists and permeates society. Few people are able to speak up and share their experiences, which might make a kid feel excluded in all respects. We shared ideas for how we can help our school grow and improve while also learning a lot of new things in our group. By beginning to hear everyone's experiences, feelings, and voices, we can create a secure environment for everyone and establish a strong connection with each and every person. In addition to acknowledging racism's existence and the fact that it has no place in our society, McNally High School also understands how it can undermine students' commitment to their academic values. Equity statements that make it easier for your

students to feel confident and comfortable and committed towards their goals. To make a better approach and HEAR from within their hearts, exploring more into it which their performance can improve.

Eventually the racism around McNally will disappear if we all cooperate and continue to live our own lives, bothering another will just bother you too, it will stick to you.

Conclusions and Thoughts

Engaging in extremely meaningful, although sometimes, deeply saddening conversations with my peers who are minority groups like me, I have learned a lot about the environment some students have to put up with. School, for example, should be a place where everyone feels safe and included despite gender, religion, culture, and ethnicity. No one should be made to feel as if they are not enough, or can't access a proper education due to preventable reasons. Racism has become ingrained in our school and is extremely toxic to those who experience it. It is so easy to let jokes slide by, or watch a peer experience racism, but have no one speak up or advocate for those of us who have been forced to keep quiet. On the rare occasion, when an individual does speak up, they are either bullied for it, or no action is taken by someone in charge within the school building. Teachers are meant to protect and advocate for us, not to be the source of racism itself. If students can't feel safe amongst their peers or teachers, who are they supposed to rely on? After hearing my peers share their deeply saddening, but not shocking experiences with active racism at school, I am not only disappointed in the people I go to school with for ever thinking such a way, but also fear for my peers in the 10th or 11th grade, as they are going to be exposed to more of this behavior as their highschool journey progresses on. Some of my peers do not have it in them to speak up, and have no one to confide in. As a result, I have seen it take a toll on their mental health and affect their academics. Being victimized just because of their skin tone, hair texture, self-identity, or faith so casually is one of the most terrifying things I have witnessed. Being in this building at times is extremely suffocating for not just me, but almost anyone I speak to of this. Why is it so casual? Why is it so common? Just in general, why?

Recommendations

As time goes on, I hope serious action is taken regarding racism. Anyone who participates, witnesses, or allows for it to happen should be seriously penalized for their actions. Whether this means in school or out of school suspension, I hope that any victim is brought to justice and can feel like they belong within the walls of this school. This could look like organizing antiracism assemblies, and educating students on the detrimental effects of racism and how it isn't just a joke, or, it could possibly look like inviting guest speakers to share their experiences with students to build acceptance. As well as continuing focus groups to connect with students and touch base.