

YOUTH FORUM AGAINST RACISM
-- Ottawa --
University of Ottawa
May 18-20, 2001

INTRODUCTION

The first of four *Youth Forums Against Racism* took place in Ottawa on May 18-20, 2001. It proved to be a fantastic and highly successful weekend, setting high expectations for the following forums. It brought together 24 participants from across Ontario and three participants from Nunavut. It was a gathering where youth who are interested in anti-racism, who have an opinion and feel motivated to do something about it, got together to discuss, debate, laugh, and create concrete anti-racism education models they feel will motivate their peers. This report attempts to document some of the discussions and ideas developed during the Ottawa Youth Forum Against Racism. Though this document has been drafted by UNA-Canada facilitators, the recommendations, strategies, and ideas contained herein are those of the participants.

The *Youth Forums Against Racism* (YFAR) initiative was launched in April 2001 in recognition of the United Nations (UN) International Year of Mobilization Against Racism and in anticipation of the Third World Conference Against Racism to be held in South Africa at the end of this summer. YFAR's primary purpose is to create a space where youth can come together to decide how best to deliver the anti-racism message to their peers. The project was designed with the belief that young people themselves are best positioned to develop an anti-racism education model that will be effective, attractive, and meaningful to youth, especially if its developers are from a multiplicity of backgrounds and regions and represent Canada's ethnic and cultural diversity.

2001 is an important year for anti-racism. In addition to being the year of the World Conference and the UN International Year Against Racism, it falls during the UN's Third Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (1994-2003). The Youth Forums Against Racism initiative builds upon this global momentum to combat racism – to create a strong society, in Canada and around the world, based on equality, justice, and dignity. Youth engagement and leadership in anti-racism education is essential to creating such a world.

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In an effort to engage a diverse range of individuals, promotion and recruitment took place through schools, universities, ethnocultural organizations, youth groups, and other organizations concerned with anti-racism.

Summary of involvement:

- ❖ 24 participants between the ages of 14-24 (average age : 18), as well as three facilitators
- ❖ Of these 24 participants, 18 were female and 6 male
- ❖ Regions represented: Ottawa and area (9), Greater Metro Toronto (7), Southern Ontario (3), Northwest Ontario (2), Nunavut (3)

Friday evening, 18 May 2001

The purpose of Friday evening's activities was to brief participants about the weekend and the project, but more importantly to get to know each other and raise the group's comfort level. As such, the bulk of the evening was social in nature.

After a series of icebreakers, a participatory session intended to build house rules and expectations was carried out by UNA-Canada facilitator Rida Abboud, in which participants created their own rules about conduct, behaviour, and respecting each other's space to speak.

The evening ended in a *talking circle* during which participants were invited to talk about their backgrounds, experiences that had shaped them, and why they had decided to take part in the Forum. This final exercise was an enjoyable and emotional session which set the mood for a productive and inspiring weekend.

Saturday, 19 May 2001

The purpose of Saturday was to first share individual understandings of racism and personal experiences of participants with racism, and to become familiar with and evaluate a selection of existing anti-racism education materials.

Participants were asked to review and critically evaluate existing anti-racism materials on Saturday in order to inform the process of developing new models on Sunday: that is, to build on existing strengths, and not repeat existing weaknesses.

UNA-Canada facilitators, Christine Parsons and Ian Foucher, started the day off by speaking briefly about the purpose and components of the Ottawa Youth Forum, the YFAR project, and the international context (in particular the relevant UN 'international years' for 2001 and the World Conference Against Racism to be held in South Africa this August and September).

Two guest speakers also joined the group on Saturday to speak about their own experiences and involvement in anti-racism work: Sonia Brereton joined us from the National Capital Alliance on Race Relations (NCARR) and Barry Thomas from the Urban Alliance on Race Relations (UARR) in Toronto.

BRAINSTORM #1: What racism issues are present in your locality?

FORMAT: Brainstorm, small group work, presentations to larger group

LENGTH: 1 hour small groups; 45 minutes presentations

DESCRIPTION: The objective of this session was to encourage participants to discuss their perceptions of racism and how they see it manifested in their communities. It was hoped that these discussions would provide an opportunity for participants to introduce personal experiences, if they felt comfortable to do so. Each small group had one hour to discuss and then a few minutes to present their concepts to the larger group. Multiple definitions and understandings of racism emerged. The following is a list of points that were brought up by participants:

ISOLATION:

- Linguistic barriers
- Culture shock
- Segregation of groups
- Lack of confidence
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Violence and suicide
- Internalization of negative images
- Creation of an “us/them” atmosphere
- Social and cultural segregation (ex. dating)
- Class division--\$ = privilege and possibility to cross racial boundaries
- Ghetto-ization of cultural communities
- Lack of confidence

EDUCATION SYSTEM:

- Lack of equality and opportunities
- Ignoring the needs of students (silencing them)
- Euro-centric education which disregards the history of all groups in Canada
- Lack of cross-cultural education
- Assimilation
- A question of access to resources

STEREOTYPING:

- Racial/derogatory slurs
- Media – creation, promotion, and reinforcement of stereotypes
- Biased news and information
- Issues in housing opportunities
- Employment equity
- Police – issues of racial profiling and violence

BLAME:

- Blaming minorities for economic and social problems
- Blaming for events that happened in the past

DIFFERENT FORMS OF RACISM:

- Religious discrimination – the presence of prominent holidays in schools
- Intra-racism – racism within cultures
- Historical racism – missionaries, slave trade, etc.
- “reverse” racism
- conflicts between different racial groups – issues of violence
- Linguistic racism
- Lack of awareness of different forms of racism – subtle/overt, systemic/individual.
- “color blindness”
- the “white standard”

WORKING SESSION #1: Review of existing educational tools

FORMAT: Small group work, presentation to larger group

LENGTH: 2 hours working session; 2 hours for presentations

DESCRIPTION: The purpose of this working session was to become familiar with a selection of existing anti-racism education tools – to know what *has been* done in order to inform the discussion of what *should be* done. Participants were asked: What are the tools strengths? What are its weaknesses? Would it catch and keep your attention? What about your peers? Would you learn anything new? Is it appropriate to your context? Are there any major gaps? What works? What would you keep? Each participant decided which particular material (see below) s/he wanted to work with, and small groups were formed accordingly. Later in the evening, each small group presented their respective tools and were encouraged to do so as interactively as possible, for example by animating an activity from the resource.

Resources used in session:

Title: *Teach Me To Thunder: A Training Manual for Anti-Racism Trainers*
Author/organization: Produced by the Canadian Labour Congress
Language: Available in English only
Location: www.clc-ctc.ca

Title: *The whole world ... My world! Racism and Youth Facilitator's Guide to Workshops and Activities*
Author/organization: Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne (FESFO), produced by the United Nations Association in Canada (UNAC)
Language: Available in French and English
Location: Copies available from UNAC, 130 Slater, Ste 900, Ottawa ON, K1P 6E2, (613) 232-5751, info@unac.org

Title: *Ten Ways to Fight Hate: a community response guide*
Author/organization: Southern Poverty Law Center (Intelligence Project)
Language: Available in English only
Location: Download from: <http://www.splcenter.org/intelligenceproject/ip-index.html>

Title: *World History of Racism in Minutes*
Author/organization: Tim McCaskell, Toronto Board of Education, Equity Department
Language: Available in English only
Location: Tel: (416) 397-3345

Title: *Digital Hate 2001 : internet report and analysis & « The New Lexicon of Hate »*
Author/organization: Simon Wiesenthal Center (Snider Social Action Institute)
Language: Available in English only
Location: www.wiesenthal.com

Sunday, 20 May 2001

Sunday proved to be an intense working and brainstorming day. The main purpose of the weekend was realized on this day with participants working on concrete actions and ideas they believed would effectively deliver the message of anti-racism to their peers.

The objectives of the day were to discuss two questions – (a) what works to get young people’s attention, (b) what are the important messages we need to get across to youth in our anti-racism education? – and to propose new, youth-driven anti-racism tools and/or strategies.

Bearing in mind the strengths and weaknesses of existing resources identified on Saturday, participants were encouraged to voice their personal goals and visions for new, youth-driven models.

The majority of the day was dedicated to the creation of five concrete ideas for action, presented in turn to the larger group for discussion and guidance.

BRAINSTORM #2: What works to get young people’s attention?

FORMAT: Large group brainstorm

TIME: 30 minutes

DESCRIPTION: The objective of this brainstorm was to discuss different means of grabbing youth’s attention, since youth themselves are best positioned to know what methods work to engage their peers’ attention – what other young people would find attractive and inspiring. There was a plenitude of ideas; the following is a list of these in the words of the participants:

OVERALL, THE MESSAGE:

- needs to be audience relevant
- has to appeal to youth
- needs to be empowering and positive
- should shock and have impact

APPEALS TO THE SENSES:

- Music/musical events/concerts
- Plays/dramas/travelling theatre
- Videos/movies

POLITICAL & CORPORATE INVOLVEMENT:

- Try to get government and corporations to take risks on youth

GO TO YOUTH!

- Reach into sub-cultures
- Start locally in your own group of friends
- Lead by example – “That’s not cool!”
- Meet the bottom line, be where they are physically and mentally

INTERACTIVE:

- Diversity camps
- Walk/run/marathon
- Poster campaign
- Multicultural day/opportunity to share cultures
- Forums where youth can speak out!

EDUCATIONAL/HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

- International studies in schools
- Learning from other youth/peers
- Guest speakers with experience – Experience speaks!!!
- Highlight of existing anti-racist work/workers/initiatives
- Historical documentaries
- Putting people in position of victim – “how does it feel”, role reversal, role playing

BRAINSTORM #3: What are the important messages we need to get across to youth in our anti-racism education?

FORMAT: Brainstorm, small group work, presentations to larger group

TIME: 1 hour

DESCRIPTION: This brainstorm session, conducted in small groups, encouraged participants to discuss what they believe are the important messages concerning racism and anti-racism that need to be communicated in their education model. The following ideas were then presented to the larger group:

OVERALL:

- Messages should be uncensored – no sugar coating!!

ACTION:

- Don't be afraid to speak out!
- Youth are the future – we can make a difference
- Unity! We need to unite as humans. We are family! Unity & diversity!
- Be pro-active
- "Ripple in the pond" effect

LEARNING/UNLEARNING:

- Racism is based in history/historical patterns
- Racism is not genetic – You can change!
- We can't deny the existence of racism/history/context

START SMALL:

- Talk to your friends and peers/engage in discussion
- Be aware of your own environment
- Don't fall into the trap

- There needs to be education at all levels/age/ability
- Question the validity of 'race'
- The problem starts in the family/we learn to be racist
- You need to educate yourself in history and facts because ignorance is dangerous

EQUALITY:

- We are all equal but some groups need special treatment to be equal
- Acknowledge commonality

DIFFERENCE:

- Embrace differences and celebrate!
- We have all led different lives, have different experiences, background and lifestyles. This affects who we are.
- Question of tolerance vs. acceptance

WORKING SESSION #2: Ideas for action – local and national strategies

FORMAT: small groups presenting ideas to larger group

LENGTH: 1¼ hours group work; 1 hour for presentations

DESCRIPTION: The purpose of this working session was for groups to create concrete action plans that they believe are appropriate, message-relevant, and engaging for their peers, bearing in mind the discussions, learning, and recommendations of prior sessions. In essence, it is these five plans that encompass the ideas, initiatives, and strategies of the participants at the Ottawa Youth Forum Against Racism.

Group 1: “Everyone is a victim until someone speaks out” – Animal Game

1. Interactive group activity in which participants are divided into animal groups (i.e. bear, pig, snake, etc). There is a description given to each group about character traits which they must exhibit.
2. Each animal group has a trait which somehow impedes its ability to interact or communicate with one other animal group. For example, the bears are not able to talk to the birds because they are allergic to feathers.
3. Each animal group is given one resource, such as glue, wood, feathers, etc. The objective of each group is to make shelter.
4. Because they need to make a house and they only have one necessary object to do so, they need to make arrangements with other groups, although they are not aware of this at the beginning. However, since each group is somehow not able (or willing) to communicate with another group, there needs to be some partnerships made that will allow each group access to all resources.

Objective and reasoning:

1. Each animal group has the opportunity to be powerful (because of their individual tools) as well as to be rejected and misunderstood. Ideally, it would symbolize issues of discrimination on the one hand, and cultural celebration on the other.
2. There would be a debrief following which would include taking into account how it felt to be rejected and how it felt to have power.
3. Some points that can be highlighted: (a) the appearance of issues of ignorance and lack of understanding, and their relation to racism and discrimination; (b) issues of alienation and frustration; (c) power and prestige accorded to group membership; (d) the damages caused by all of these factors.

GROUP #2: Interactive website and chat room

1. A highly interactive and accessible website which targets youth and includes links to resources, references, people involved in anti-racism, picture galleries, email lists, chat/‘vent’ rooms, lists of corporations with social responsibility, pop-culture, and possible resources for funding.
2. It would be used as an awareness-raising tool as well as a place where youth can gather and engage in an online forum to discuss, debate, and network.

GROUP #3: Around the world in 2 days – Cultural Festival

1. A youth organized, corporate-sponsored cultural festival which would have support from municipal governments and ethno-cultural groups.
2. It would offer exposure to different cultures, promote anti-racism through awareness and education, but most importantly, it would be interactive and fun!
3. Some of the activities that would be included are pavilions with booths, presentations of dance, foods, costumes, games, crafts for children, handprint wall, music concerts, etc.
4. The group identified strengths as well as weaknesses associated with this activity. Some strengths included: (a) completely organized by youth; (b) raise awareness of other cultures; (c) promote community networking. Some of the weaknesses identified: (a) getting

community and corporate support may be difficult; (b) getting people to keep their commitments; and most importantly, (c) funding.

GROUP #4: Youth Ambassadors – peer education

1. The target population is high school students, where no more than thirty students should be informed at once to safeguard the intimacy of the group and to ensure students feel comfortable to speak out.
2. The facilitators should be Grade 12/OAC students or young university students to ensure that there is no significant age gap between the facilitator and participants. The facilitators would have had previous anti-racism training.
3. The session would start off with a provocative introduction which is enriched with information, shocking statistics, and visual material. This will captivate youth so that they are engaged throughout the whole presentation.
4. The rest of the session will be a workshop format where trainers will present different tools for anti-racism. It is also intended to provoke dialogue and will be moderated by facilitators to keep discussion “positive”.
5. It was discussed that there may be issues of presentation locality. The high school environment may be seen as difficult and/or too impersonal to entice youth to be candid and divulge personal beliefs and values. Participants may be hesitant to share.
6. They have also taken into consideration the bias that may exist in choosing who participates in the workshops. There needs to be mechanisms to ensure different socio-economic class representation.

GROUP #5: Canadian Racism Activity for Youth

1. The target population is youth in grade schools and university.
2. The objective is to expose youth to the “realistic” aspects of different races and cultures to clear stereotypes and inform youth by exposure to different cultures.
3. The pre-activity would be a question sheet given to each participant with questions about different cultures. They would answer from their own knowledge. For example, the questions would be about one particular ethno-cultural community in their city and would include such questions as: “Describe their clothing and food”, “What do you think of them?”, “What do your parents or friends think of them?”, “What have you learned on TV about them?”
4. The activity would then introduce participants to people in the community who would be willing to join them for a day in order to expose them to the culture and traditions of that particular community. Lots of observing, interaction, and question asking.
5. The post-activity would include the participants meeting and discussing their experiences and sharing their ‘altered’ views. This will produce an awareness throughout the entire group, as they will learn from others presentations in addition to their own experience.

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For closure to the weekend, the day was concluded with a final *talking circle*...