

I think we need to learn more about diverse cultures and traditions to educate us for experiences that might occur later on.

I'm happy that you've taken the time for parents opinions, we feel more involved.

Training for staff is great, but only once you have made the necessary changes, otherwise you are putting a bandaid on a hemorrhaging wound.

From their voices...

Report on the Environmental Scan on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion within the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board

By

Dr. Myrna Lashley

Mr. Geoffrey Hipps Dr.

Geneviève Légaré

Montréal

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the behest of Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board, we conducted a survey to enquire into the state and comprehension of Equity Diversity and Inclusion in its system.

Three cohorts of SWLSB stakeholders were identified:

- 1) Students: Grade 5 through students enrolled in Adult Education and Vocational Training;
- 2) Employees: Includes teaching, support and clerical staff;
- 3) Parents/Guardians.

The survey was sent to parents and employees. Students were provided with time in which to complete their surveys on school premises.

EDI was defined thusly:

Equity: the characteristic or quality of being fair.

Diversity: the practice of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc.

Inclusion: the practice or policy of including all people who might otherwise be excluded.

All surveys were deliberately constructed to ensure total anonymity of respondents. The intention for this analysis was to identify a general environmental scan of Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board and thus results were aggregated by survey. It was not the intention to identify any single person or any groups of individuals by job category, grade level or subjects taught. We were also not interested in which schools or centres students attended.

There were 3,076 responses to the surveys distributed as follows: Employees (202); Parents (621); Students (2,553). Thus, there were 92,280 points of data to analyze (3 groups X 10 questions X 3,076). Due to anonymity and confidentiality, we have no way to ascertain who, or what school, is represented in the results. In the few instances where the school was identified, we redacted the name. Based on the vocabulary employed, we are certain that students representing many scholastic levels of the school board, including adult centres, responded to the survey.

Qualitative analysis was applied to the data using the techniques of Braun and Clarke (2006). After the development of the themes, the major categories were entered into the analysis. In the report, each category contains quotations from students, parents and employees and are followed by recommendations pertinent to that category.

At this juncture it seems provident to indicate that some of the comments, as well as the recommendations, may prove difficult to internalize for some readers. However, we emphasize that this process is necessary as SWLSB moves toward the development and implementation of sound EDI policies and actions for the benefit of students, parents, employees and society.

The following are those categories with a brief description of their content.

The Division Argument, greater societal divisions:

In this section, some participants were concerned that merely discussing issues pertaining to Equity Diversity and Inclusion could lead to greater societal conflict and disharmony. We refuted this argument and pointed out that the division already exists. Indeed, that is why the discussions are occurring. Since some suggested that Critical Race Theory is divisive and responsible for minorities feeling ostracized and those of the majority feeling attacked, we provided the historical and academic underpinnings of the Theory as well as the misunderstandings surrounding it. Therefore, the Division Argument should be read as a whole.

Identity

This segment addresses how identity is formed and developed. It also discusses some of the components which help humans identify who they are and how they are situated in society—by themselves and others. Hence “clothing” discusses its relationship to one’s sense of belonging and looks at the disconnect between dress codes for girls and the need for them to be viewed as acceptable by their peers.

An important part of identity is one’s name and pronouns. We point out the importance of being sensitive to the needs of students to be recognized and respected. Through empathetic interactions with students, teachers and others can learn how to pronounce students’ name, even if the listener experiences some difficulty due to linguistic or other reasons. We also point out that adolescents are going through a period of identity crisis and are trying to establish their sense of self – this includes the pronouns by which they distinguish themselves. Not learning how to properly pronounce students’ names and ignoring their pronouns is not only insulting and derogatory, but runs the risk of negating the cultural, familial, and historical connections of individuals. Thus, besides other mental health challenges, we compounded the effects of transgenerational trauma and the individual’s place and standing in the world.

The recognition that there are more than the two genders to which most readers have been become accustomed must be acknowledged. In many instances this will call for a change in vocabulary but also changes in behaviours. It means that all students, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, and sexual identity must be treated as respected and fully functioning members of society. It also means that SWLSB has not only the duty to ensure the safety and security of these students, but the school board must also support parents who may also be in the process of adapting to their children's reality. Similarly, SWLSB has a responsibility to provide teachers with training and tools on how to make classrooms for all of their students safe, without exception. Students must be actively involved in helping each other to not only, remove stereotypes from their thinking, vocabulary and behaviours, but to use their personal influence with others to uphold and protect the dignity of all others.

Respect

Obviously, to ensure safe and secure classrooms and other spaces implement the recommendations found in this report calls for respect. Being respected was something which students identified as important to their existence. SWLSB must ensure that the respect being shown is real and not just performative if it is to positively influence and modify institutional behaviours. Respect is active rather than passive. In other words, it must extend beyond the ticking of an administrative box. Teachers have a major role to play in teaching students the meaning of respect toward self and others. Furthermore, students are asking teachers to display such respect toward them. Parents and employees also highlighted respect as a major requirement for EDI.

Allyship

Much attention is being paid to the concept of allyship: what it means; how to engage in it; how to know when one has achieved it; and, most importantly, whose responsibility it is. The assumption is that those who want to be allies are willing to use their power to influence situations and outcomes. In other words, there is an assumption that the 'ally' possesses some type of meaningful privilege which can be used to support those who are experiencing some type of oppression, and that the influence of the ally is such that it can positively affect the outlook and/or the behaviour of the perceived oppressor. Thus, allyship and privilege are closely related. Being an ally is not simple and requires a self-reflection which involves examining one's privileges which, in turn, leads to cognitive structuring. This is vital for the learner as well as for those in authority who are transmitting messages of acceptable behaviours. Such structuring will not only breed empathy and understanding, but will assist persons to move beyond compassion into action.

Truth and Reconciliation

This segment focuses primarily on Canada's Indigenous communities. It addresses the ills to which they were subjected and the long-lasting effects of that subjugation, such as the health issues of the Residential School System and intergenerational trauma. Clearly, no organization, especially one with the mandate to educate youth and adults, can embark on an EDI journey without including Truth and Reconciliation.

Resilience

Individuals who have been the subjects of traumatic incidents – including racism – are often expected to demonstrate resilience. What is seldom discussed is how resilience is defined. There is also a societal view that resilience is a single unitary concept. Thus, one is either resilient or one is not. Such a perspective does not account for the myriad types of traumas which an individual may undergo. There is a supposition that the individual alone is responsible for the development of resilience. However, such is not the case as resilience needs a supportive environment to foster, support, and maintain it. We argue that the developmental vulnerability of school-aged children makes the relationship between the needs of the child and the 'capacity and willingness' of the systems to assist the child to develop contextually and culturally appropriate coping skills of paramount importance. Obviously, the educational structure constitutes a major element of those systems.

School to Prison Pipeline

Black students are often judged more harshly for school offences than their White counterparts. For example, Black students may be removed from the school premises for a sustained period. Furthermore, schools often contact police to discipline these students. Clearly, a child who is removed from school is not receiving the academic instructions needed to eventually become full and responsible citizens. Likewise, a child who has been subjected to removal by law enforcement will have a police file which will remain in place until the child reaches the age of majority. Thus, the child becomes an 'object' which can be 'researched' each time something goes awry within the system. Even if the child is placed within the Health and Social Services system, the child has still been labelled and the entire family is then subjected to the scrutiny of the authorities of the system. In other words, a process has been started from which the student and family may have difficulty extricating themselves. This is one of the pathways of the 'school to prison pipeline.' Although the school to prison pipeline usually refers to Black students, the same problems exist for other marginalized communities such as indigenous persons, those undergoing extreme poverty and other persons who indicated 'other.' In other words, labelling is a major issue with which these communities must contend. When the labelling is being used by school authorities, it becomes very difficult for a student to thrive and succeed. As Frederick stated: *"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."*

Health and Exclusion

There is a logical questioning of how systemic and structural exclusion affects individuals' health; what that implies for the education of students; how parents view how they and their children are treated within educational institutions; how information is transmitted to students; how conscious educators are of their effects upon the social-political and educational systems; and what impact their attitudes and behaviours have upon the overall health and well-being of students. It has been known for quite some time that racism is not victimless and has resulted in such incidents of physical afflictions as obesity, elevated blood pressure, cardiovascular incidents, addictions, and metabolic disorders. Interestingly, these persist across the lifespan. Schizophrenia, mood and anxiety disorders and other forms of psychological distress have also been identified as challenges in this population.

Family Structures

The nature and definition of 'family' are constantly changing and is a construct to which educators must continuously adapt. Some variables which influence these changes and necessitate the adaptations are demographics; cultural recognitions and understandings; racial norms; ethnic considerations; social norms; political context; sexual orientations; gendered realities, etc. The question is, therefore, what and who constitutes family as it is clear that the traditional nuclear family (commonly viewed as two -usually married- adults with their socially acceptable offspring) can no longer be used as the standard by which all families are judged. Addressing this question is more than an academic exercise. Indeed, the need to recognize and integrate different constructions and constellations of families were highlighted by students, parents and employees.

Justice and Fairness

The notion of justice and fairness was very prominent in the answers of the students. They also advocate justice and fairness for all, even those with whom they may not identify, or fully understand. We are not always in accord with some of the language used, especially when it demonstrates an *unconscious* continuation of a colonial mind frame and systemic stereotyping and discrimination. Nevertheless, it is evident that students understand the concept of equity as well as the difference between equality and equity and are capable of extending that knowledge into wide areas - such as assistive technology for those with specific needs. They also understand that it is not a single moment in time or limited to actions within the walls of their scholastic institutions, but that it has an ongoing effect on their lives and the lives of others.

The Role of Schools, Teachers and Other Educators

Students have high expectations of teachers. Furthermore, students view the interactions they have with their teachers, as well as their roles, to be of paramount importance in attaining the goals of EDI. They also feel that teachers need to be aware of important social issues and changes and incorporate them into their lesson plans. Students are also prepared to hold school staff and educators responsible for (what the students perceive to be) behaviours which may be the antitheses of EDI practices. Furthermore, students want teachers to teach accurate historical information and to extend that to actions and behaviours. In other words, students expect their educators to “walk the talk.”

Bullying

Public Safety Canada state that delinquency is more prevalent among children who bully than those who are bullied. Moreover, those who bully are more likely to become involved in adult criminal activity and, in addition, to suffer serious psychological problems. In other words, bullying is not only detrimental to the well-being of those being bullied, but often has long-lasting negative effects upon the bullies. Although students in our survey did not make direct reference to an Anti-Bullying Anti Violence policy, they were aware that ‘something’ gets done when bullying occurs. However, they did express concern about how that ‘something’ is enacted. It is therefore not surprising that students declared that they want teachers to pay greater attention to bullying, not surprisingly, parents are also concerned about bullying and how it is tackled by SWLSB.

Abilities

In this section we are using the term ‘abilities’ as we want to focus on what an individual can do as opposed to what they cannot do. We are also using the term to cover the many diversities found within this category, such as neurodiversity (e.g., ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia) and neurodivergence (e.g., atypical neurological development). One area which is often ignored, or the veracity of sufferers questioned, is hidden disabilities. Otherwise stated, because some challenges cannot be seen or are kept ‘secret’ by sufferers and their entourage, they are often overlooked by those best placed to provide assistance, such as school authorities. This is not due to malice or other forms of ill will. However, it is easy to overlook that which is not readily recognized or understood. We emphasize that this population forms part of the diversity of the school board and as such, an important element of EDI.

Employees' Responses

Unsurprisingly, employees' responses focused primarily on workplace issues. However, given that this report is for the school board, we gave precedence to replies which prioritized school and educational issues. Nonetheless, it is important that those concerns, comments and suggestions be made known to the board through the verbatim responses of employees.

After the above sections, the report addresses the limitations of the study. This is followed by a discussion section in which the authors present their interpretation of the data. The discussion is, further, accompanied by general recommendations which neither supersede nor dilute those already made in specific areas.

The final concluding segment focuses on the fact that the changing face of Canada means that Equity, Diversity and Inclusion are realities in the lives of today's students. These truths require changes in the educational system and teachers must incorporate them into their curricula through what they teach, and how they teach. School boards also need to be aware of these changes and ascertain that their employees and images are representative of the Québec population.

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