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EVERYDAY INCLUSION WITH RACIALIZED YOUTH IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES (Paper)

**Abstract or Résumé:**

This paper describes findings from a research project about Racialized youth experiences of belonging and inclusion in public library spaces. It highlights themes of safety, accessibility, representation, and agency that emerged from interviews, observations, and surveys. It also describes a co-design process that engaged Racialized youth and ongoing initiatives to make public libraries more welcoming to diverse groups of teens.

## 1. Introduction

In Canada, demographics have shifted rapidly (Statistics Canada, 2023), and ethno-cultural diversity continues to increase across the country. Despite the 1985 Multiculturalism Act (Government of Canada, 1985) and some of the highest levels of immigration in the world, complex barriers to meaningful integration remain entrenched (Ager & Strang, 2008; George & Selimos, 2019). Many newcomers report not accessing formal services and programming, preferring instead to rely on family and friends for information and resources (CLIP 2022). Additionally, traditional, programmatic approaches to integration are not always successful in dealing with social exclusion and marginalization (Freeman 2004). Leaping off from the concept of "everyday multiculturalism" (Wise & Velayutham, 2009), this project explores ways in which public spaces, especially public libraries, can foster inclusion and belonging with Racialized and newcomer youth.

Racialized youth might not feel welcome in or like libraries are places where they belong (Gibson & Hughes-Hassell, 2023; Matthews, 2021). This tends to be the result of implicit factors rather than overt policies. For example, locations that are difficult to access or not in areas near their homes or schools deter users from accessing library spaces; the presence of security guards can have unintended consequences for some youth. Gibson & Hughes-Hassell's (2023) study in North Carolina described Black and Racialized youth perceptions of library staff; staff perceived as unwelcoming or authoritarian had a negative impact on youth views of libraries. Likewise, outdated beliefs that libraries are silent spaces of scholarship may persist. Similarly, patrons from places with very different public library cultures, or from places without public libraries may lack an understanding of libraries in a Canadian context. To address these issues, public libraries in our city have worked on initiatives to make libraries welcoming spaces for youth, which are discussed in this paper.

In response to the literature in this area and the library initiatives that are already in place, this project explored two overarching research questions:

- What are the everyday practices that surround the experience of belonging and inclusion for Racialized and immigrant youth?
- How can youth spaces within public libraries contribute to increased feelings of social inclusion and belonging for Racialized and immigrant youth?

## 2. Methodology

We attempted to launch this project in spring 2020, and understandably there were stumbles and false starts. Our research plan was no longer feasible due to limited access to public spaces and public libraries that were closed to the public. As such, we added a preliminary survey to inform and reframe the rest of the project.

Once libraries and other spaces reopened, we interviewed Racialized youth library users (*n*=14) identified in the preliminary survey and invited to take part in interviews. We also surveyed youth library users (*n*=79: 50 were online surveys completed by preliminary survey respondents; 29 were completed in person at three public library branches). Lastly, we completed observations (*n*=23) at library branches and other public spaces. Using a mixed methods approach (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018), we analyzed results. Interview transcripts, text survey responses, and observations were coded using an iterative and grounded theory approach, adopting Tesch's (1990) eight steps for qualitative analysis. A secondary cycle of focused coding (Saldaña, 2016) was then done to identify sub-codes and key themes.

A co-design team (McKercher, 2020) of Racialized youth and two facilitators was then formed. Co-design is an approach that meaningfully involves those who are most impacted by the research, most participants had been interviewed earlier. This group met regularly to review, expand on, and contextualize findings. They also co-designed two interventions to foster feelings of belonging and inclusion of Racialized youth in public spaces.

## 3. Findings

Four major themes connected to belonging in public spaces and libraries kept reappearing and prompting rich discussion among the co-design team.

*Safety*. Teens have varying definitions of safety, but many perceive safety to be much more than a physical concept. For example, security in public spaces prompted mixed feelings. Some youth felt that the presence of police or security guards made them feel safer, while it made others feel uncomfortable or under surveillance. They overwhelmingly reported feeling safe in public libraries, especially ones located within walking distance of their home or school. They reported feeling least safe on public transit and found themselves having to balance safety and convenience when choosing whether to use public transit at night or from a location they perceived as unsafe (based on observed graffiti, vandalism, or drug use).

*Accessibility*. Related to safety, accessibility was important to teens, who often rely on others for transportation, use public transit, or walk. Youth reported visiting neighbourhood libraries more than the better resourced central library which is further from their homes and schools. Data from interviews and observations also indicated that youth prefer environments they can adapt to their needs (e.g., moveable chairs and furnishings that offer them privacy).

*Representation*. Racialized youth often referred to a desire to 'see themselves' in public libraries to experience belonging. For example, they appreciated books and other materials related to their culture, seeing library staff of colour, and being greeted in other languages.

*Agency*. Teens often have limited agency in public settings, and their behaviour may be 'policed' by staff or members of the public; for example, if they are not quiet in a library, responses from other users or staff may render them voiceless. Environments and opportunities where they can use their voice are therefore crucial and in line with community theory in which youth get a sense of belonging by feeling influential and having a voice (Evans, 2007).

For Racialized youth, accessibility, safety, and representation are necessary but not sufficient to experience belonging. The concept of agency was explored during the co-design process, when it became apparent that a sense of belonging is not something one receives, rather it is often something one contributes to.

## 4. Implications & Recommendations

While programmatic approaches may foster inclusion, not all youth are willing, able, and interested to take part. Our project explored how public spaces, particularly libraries, can foster inclusion and belonging for Racialized youth. Our findings demonstrated that a sense of belonging in libraries is not a given, even for the youth we interviewed and surveyed, who were already library users.

The youth on our co-design team developed a sense of agency during this project, but the irony that they were engaged in a program is not lost on us. What about those who do not connect with programs? The youth tried to address this in what they co-designed. They did a kindness activity where they approached members of the public and initiated conversations about kindness. They gave out small gift cards, flowers, or affirmation cards to brighten community members' day. This was a grass-roots youth-initiated activity where they became agents of belonging, making the leap into the unknown by approaching strangers. They all reported that this was a powerful experience that helped them feel part of the community. The team also co-designed an art installation for a library's teen centre. It is an interactive mapping installation where users connect strings to places where they feel safe, welcome, and like they belong. The installation also invited users to share their ideas on sticky notes and through a QR code.

Among these activities, the public library continues to take holistic approach to youth inclusion. For example:

- Staff take part in empathy-based training that has an emphasis on understanding teen development and the teenage brain; staff who understand teens better tend to treat them better and are more capable of building strong relationships with them.
- Many locations have dedicated or reserved teen spaces.
- Youth are consulted, and their feedback is used when designing spaces.
- Programs are designed based on community feedback and grounded in research.
- There is regularly scheduled drop-in programming.
- In person and virtual programming are high interest.
- Meaningful volunteer roles exist (e.g., there nearly 1500 youth volunteers across the city).
- There are diverse and high interest physical and digital collections.
- Academic support is available (e.g., programming directly into classrooms teaching students about media literacy, digital and physical collections to support teens with their schoolwork).
- There is open access to gaming and self-directed activities.

Despite these promising practices, it is a perpetual work in progress. Dedicated teen spaces that provide flexibility and opportunities are implemented unevenly through the system. A current project is to scale down the teen resources and experience from the central library branch for smaller libraries to increase equitable access. Additionally, continued staff training is essential; successful teen services rely on building trust and relationships with teens, which can be challenging. Finally, the importance of representation cannot be overstated, especially when it comes to instilling a sense of belonging in the space for diverse youth. Our city's public libraries are always working to improve our diversity, but already have many frontline staff who are racialized, immigrants, neurodiverse, or LGBTQ+, and that helps teens with those same barriers feel like the library is a place for them.

Through improved practice within their youth spaces, libraries can create environments that are safe, accessible, representative, and empowering where Racialized youth can experience belonging through everyday acts of inclusion.

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