

Evidence Brief

Promising Practices: Cultural Pluralism, Youth & The Arts

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched online databases using the following key terms: "cultural pluralism," "multiculturalism," "youth," and "Ontario."

Key Terms

Cultural pluralism is "the process of creating a society through critical and self-critical encounter with one another, acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences" (The Pluralism Project, n.d.). **Diversity** is a description of the demographics of a society or community, whereas **cultural pluralism** is an active, reciprocal process of engagement. Cultural pluralism "results from the daily decisions taken by state institutions, by civil society actors and associations, and by individuals to recognize and value human differences" (Global Centre for Pluralism, n.d.).

Understanding Cultural Pluralism in Canada

Multiculturalism was formally introduced to Canadian federal policy by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971, in a policy titled 'Multiculturalism Within a Bilingual Framework' (Harper, 1997), which recognized **cultural pluralism** as centrally important to Canadian society. The policy of multiculturalism resulted in significant changes to Ontario's educational curriculum and the organization, structure, and processes within elementary and secondary schools. For example, schools increasingly began to implement initiatives to celebrate diversity and difference. This approach has been criticized for assuming that "the knowledge and celebration of cultural differences will automatically ease intergroup relations by making students more tolerant" (Harper, 1997, p. 200), or changing their attitudes and behaviours.

People of colour have criticized the narrative of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism, arguing that it diminishes their lived experiences of **racism and systemic oppression**. For example, Thurairajah (2017) states:

Multiculturalism in Canada has been branded as an ideology in which all Canadians are Canadians irrespective of difference; and, furthermore, these differences are meant to be a

source of celebration. However, in taking this perspective, the occurrence of racism is minimized, and the history of settler-colonialism is ignored. (p. 137)

Statistics Canada reported an increase in hate crimes in Canada in 2016, including a 16% increase in the number of hate crimes categorized as ‘violent’ (e.g. assault, threats, criminal harassment), compared to 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Referring to the disconnect between discourse and reality, Perry (2015) argues that Canada is engaged with a “myth of multiculturalism” (p. 1637).

When discussing cultural pluralism or engaging in work to advance a pluralistic society, it is critical to acknowledge and listen to the experiences of racialized people and ethnic, faith or cultural groups that are marginalized in Canada.

Promising Practices: Cultural Pluralism, Youth & The Arts

1. Support racialized and newcomer youth in the development of a positive racial-ethnic identity.

As an ideal, cultural pluralism encourages newcomers to retain their unique cultural identity, rather than assimilating into the dominant (white) culture. Research shows that racialized youth benefit from developing a positive racial-ethnic identity. Organizations with the appropriate resources and staff expertise can enable this by facilitating positive race-based experiences. Research shows that early to middle adolescence (from about ages 11 to 16) is a critical time to facilitate positive race-based experiences for Black youth, which ultimately contribute to a strong ethnic-racial identity. Whereas younger children can recognize racial and ethnic groups, adolescence is the time when Black youth are developing their own ethnic-racial identity. The development of a strong ethnic-racial identity “protects against the negative effects of racial and ethnic discrimination and is associated with health and positive development” (Loyd & Williams, 2017, p. 30).

2. Invest in professional development for program staff and volunteers to build an organizational culture that recognizes the complexity of pluralism.

Although cultural pluralism is a reciprocal process, it is important to recognize that – historically and presently – white, Anglo-Canadians have held more political, economic, and social power; our institutions, elected officials, health indicators, socioeconomic statistics, and much more continue to reflect this power. Social justice, as a movement and a lens for understanding these differences, “seeks to establish a more equitable distribution of power and resources, so all people can live with dignity, self-determination, and physical and psychological safety” (Goodman, 2011, p. 4). Whereas diversity training aims to raise awareness of difference, social justice education addresses “issues of equity, power relations, and institutionalized oppression” (Goodman, 2011, p. 4). Organizations committed to cultural pluralism should work to develop staff and team members’ understanding and ability to discuss the complexity between the ideal of pluralism and the lived realities for many

Canadians.

3. Work collaboratively with other arts organizations committed to cultural pluralism.

Organizations can benefit from working collaboratively to advance cultural pluralism and, specifically, to explore how to do this work with youth. Since 2009, the Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Movement Ontario (CPAMO) has worked to advance cultural pluralism and to elevate Indigenous and racialized artists within the arts. Smith's (2012) book *Pluralism in the Arts in Canada: A Change is Gonna Come* and the CPAMO toolkit (2018) *Now Is The Time* contain many resources to inform training for staff, designing programs for youth, and developing an organizational culture committed to pluralism and social justice. The Canadian Dance Assembly (2015) created a brief guide with reflective questions that might prompt critical reflection on the extent to which cultural pluralism is being integrated into an organization, program, or arts community. Where possible, organizations may wish to share their own resources, materials, and learnings in order to advance cultural pluralism in the arts in Ontario.

4. Create meaningful roles and leadership opportunities for youth to engage with cultural pluralism and arts programming.

Youth can build social capital when organizations intentionally create leadership roles and/or meaningful opportunities for engagement. This can be particularly important for organizations working with Black, racialized, Indigenous, newcomer or refugee youth, and/or youth living in poverty. By creating appropriate leadership opportunities, organizations can share power with youth and help youth to develop new skills.

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