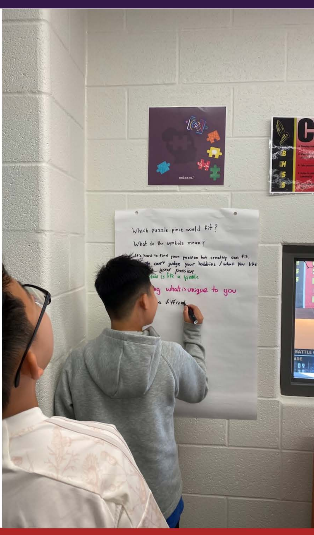
unlearn x YRDSB

Learning, Equity, and Inclusivity

By Samaer Gill

Introduction

unlearn had the opportunity to join the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) at their Learning, Equity, and Inclusivity - Transformative Education Through Collective Action Symposium on November 22nd, and 23rd of 2023. These two days were full of wisdom, transformation, knowledge, and positive energy. From hearing keynote speakers Njeri Damali Sojourner-Campbell, and Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, and having the privilege of conducting multiple workshops for participants, the symposium was an opportunity for all who attended to deepen their critical consciousness.



The study highlights unlearn's journey leading up to the symposium, collaborating with YRDSB students, focusing on **student voice** and authentic street data, aligning with the symposium's goals over the two days.

The Journey

October 13 to October 24, 2023
at Bill Hogarth Secondary School

Our journey began with discussing the role and impact unlearn would have at the symposium. The collective decision was made for unlearn to facilitate two workshops with YRDSB students from Grade 7-9 (approx 60-75 students) to allow for student voice to be gathered.

Tuesday, October 13th

Day One

With two workshops at different dates with the same students, we planned to take students on a learning and unlearning journey.

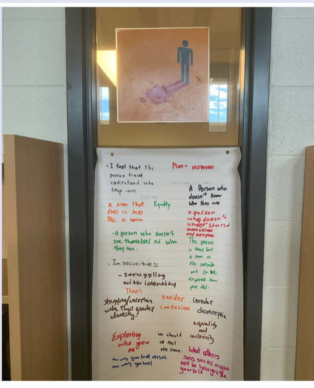
The first workshop

was an opportunity to set the stage with students and allow everyone to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. At unlearn, we often say that students become teachers, and that we all shift from being and feeling like an expert to becoming co-learners.

Our driving question for the students that day was:

How can YOU make school safer, better, and more inclusive for EVERYONE?

Students participated in a variety of activities such as a gallery walk, working with unlearn poster packs, and sharing their thoughts and ideas. Following the activities, students took a post-workshop survey to anonymously address issues in their schools. Realizing that surveys themselves have limitations, we wanted to give both an ample amount of time to complete this survey, and also options for students to write in answers for multiple choice questions that didn't reflect their ideas (see Appendix B)



Friday, October 24th

Day Two

The second workshop took place 11 days after our initial workshop.

The second workshop

allowed students to reflect on the anonymous survey data and share their thoughts and ideas. This reflection occurred in both small and large groups. Additionally, Abhi and myself spoke to several students about their workshop experiences. With about 3 weeks away from the symposium, we wanted to reflect on how we could incorporate the student voice collected to the overall content for the workshops

November 22-23, 2023

The Symposium

Both unlearn workshops were to take place on the 22nd from 10:50 am-12:20 pm and 1:20 pm-2:50 pm.

Prior to creating the slide deck for the symposium workshops, the YRDSB held a Workshop Facilitator Information Session including considerations for facilitators to consider. Some of these considerations included:

- Focus of the workshop is grounded in dismantling the barriers that underserved and marginalized students experience
- As we build our workshop, we ground it in the Directors Action Plan
- Interactive, engagement, movement
- Aim for 30 mins of conversation in total

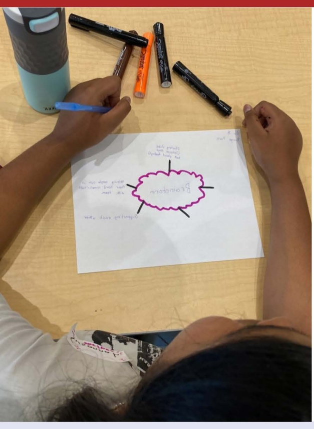
We were honoured with being able to serve

70-90 participants

in each of our workshops

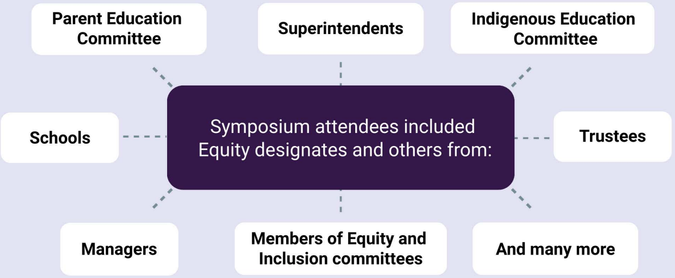
The Set Up

YRDSB was exceptional at providing support in the facilitation of our workshops by providing audio, visual, and setup arrangements. The layout featured round tables, accommodating 7-12 participants per table, fostering a collaborative space for interaction. Abundant wall space was thoughtfully provided, allowing us to display our unlearn designs throughout the venue, allowing for an ambiance vital to the unlearn experience. Two high-definition projector screens were provided, complemented by two wireless microphones, ensuring engagement and communication clarity for all participants.



The Plan

The plan for each workshop was for participants to view the authentic student voice and street data collected, experience unlearn's critical thinking resources, discuss student examples that support the Anti-Black Racism (ABR), and Indigenous Education and Equity Strategies (IEES), and take action by asking the simple question - **So What, Now What?**



Symposium attendees included Equity designates and others from:

- **Parent Education Committee**
- **Superintendents**
- **Indigenous Education Committee**
- **Schools**
- **Trustees**
- **Managers**
- **Members of Equity and Inclusion committees**
- **And many more**

70-90 participants

were apart of our unlearn workshops at the symposium

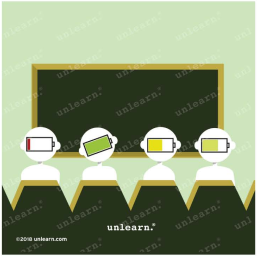
800 to 900 staff

staff was expected at the symposium in total

Morning Workshop

Reflections

Workshop differences noted due to new participants. Participants included Equity Designates, Indigenous Education Liaisons, Administrators, Managers and Supervisors from various departments. Activities included a check in. Reimagining of the question "how are you?" When we ask this question, are we prepared to really here how someone is feeling? If we're asked this question, can we move from automated responses to authentic responses?



We challenge this idea with using our Rechargable Design asking: What battery level are you at today and why? Participants engaged in a Gallery Walk including a variety of unlearn designs that challenged everyone to critically think about their school communities.

Obstacle

The QR code seemed to not allow users with their smartphones to access the action plan. A future consideration could be to have this as a takeaway activity that can be done later with their respective teams, or to have a backup handout to distribute in the event of technological difficulties. Luckily, many participants did have notebooks with them and we were able to pivot to continue the action plan.

Impact

Participants' reactions to student survey data were both shocked and inspired.

Future Considerations

Suggested alternatives for overcoming technological difficulties.

Afternoon Workshop

Workshop Similarities

While both workshops were similar in content and flow, having new participants in each workshop allowed for reflections. We had noticed the first workshop had heard a lot about unlearn, but not necessarily have seen the resource being used in their schools, or classrooms.

Timing Adjustment

The second workshop was held after lunch, prompting a potential shift in content pacing. The end of this session was special as we had a chance to meet and network with so many incredible individuals in the space that both greatly appreciated the unlearn experience and are doing incredible work.

Increased Vulnerability

Afternoon conversations tended to delve into more vulnerable topics, likely influenced by global events.

Focus on Students

Despite varied discussions, the emphasis remained on the students and the desired educational change.

The Results

At this time, many of the results are difficult to contextualize from the symposium as learning, equity, and inclusivity are continuous actions with results that are measured over time. What we were able to gather was:

Participant Satisfaction

High satisfaction reported with unlearn workshops.

Workshop Characteristics

Participants enjoyed interactive elements and comfortable conversation atmosphere.

Feedback Session

Discussion held with YRDSB on December 20th, 2023, for reflection and improvement.

Student Involvement

YRDSB created a video featuring student and educator voices from the symposium.

Key Takeaways

from students and their insights gained from participating in the 2 workshops

> *"I didn't know what we would be talking about or what to expect. I expected more individual, like handouts. It's different in a better way. I like to talk, and, like, be collaborative and interactive and communicate way more. Like that's my style of learning, so that's easier for me to retain information like this."*
>
> **Grade 9 Student, Bill Hogarth Secondary School**

> *"I was introduced to new ideas that I hadn't really thought about, or considered a lot before."*
>
> *"Inclusivity was a really big idea in most of the posters."*
>
> *"How can I help people who don't feel included? What can I do to make a difference in their lives?"*
>
> **Grade 8 Student, Rouge Park Public School**

> *"One of the things that really stood out to us when looking at the survey results was how are we going to connect with the 27% of students that feel unseen, or unheard, or that their voice does not matter in our schools?"*
>
> **Educator, Rouge Park Public School**

Conclusion

It was incredible working with a group of wonderful students at Bill Hogarth and amazing educators at the symposium. We felt that this was not only valuable, but important for all that were involved. We're proud to have inspired positive change, critical thinking, and equitable conversations to continue at YRDSB.

Appendix A

Sample of Student Responses

Students engaged with a gallery walk of unlearn designs. These designs are a resource for individuals looking to provide a tool to promote critical thinking, and inspire transformative conversations surrounding equity and human rights. In this activity, students are given brief instructions to share their thoughts, ideas, questions, and personal reflections to every design they are able to get to. Below are a few examples.

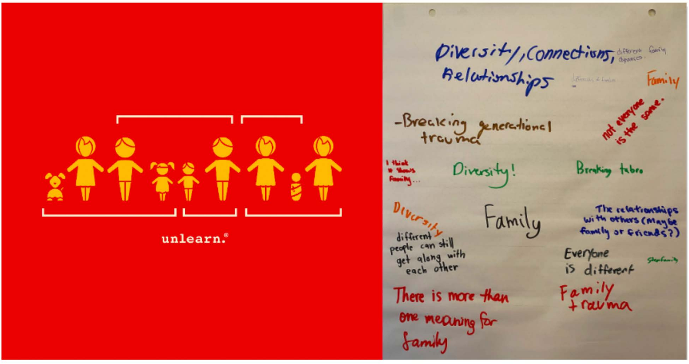

unlearn.
Diversity, Connections, Relationships
different family dynamics.
Family
-Breaking generational trauma
not everyone is the same.
I think it shows Family...
Diversity!
Breaking taboo
Diversity
Family
The relationships with others (Maybe family or friends?)
different people can still get along with each other
Everyone is different
There is more than one meaning for family
Family + trauma

Figure A1. Student responses to our design titled “Family”

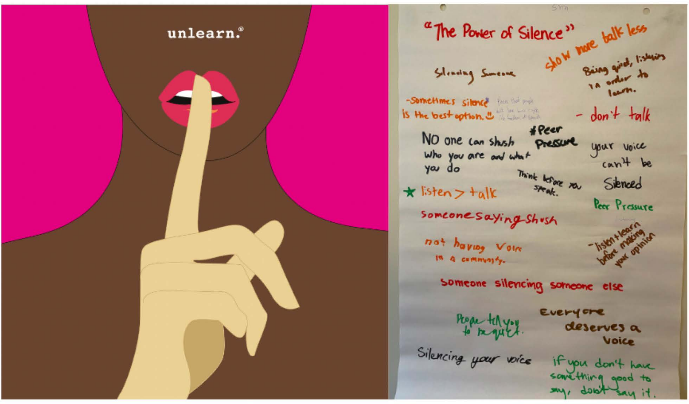
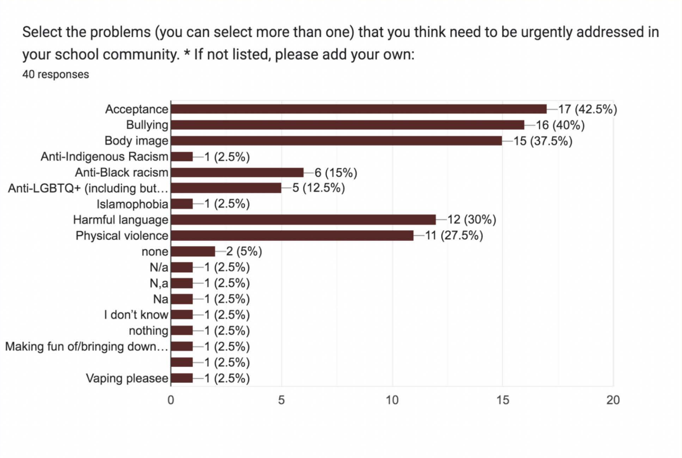

unlearn.
“The Power of Silence”
show more talk less
Silencing Someone
Being quiet, listening in order to learn.
-Sometimes silence is the best option.
- don't talk
NO one can shush who you are and what you do
#Peer Pressure
your voice can't be Silenced
Think before you speak.
★ listen > talk
Peer Pressure
someone saying shush
not having voice in a community.
-listen + learn before making your opinion
someone silencing someone else
People tell you to be quiet.
Everyone deserves a voice
Silencing your voice
if you don't have something good to say, don't say it.

Figure A2. Student responses to our design titled “Shhh!”

Appendix B

Sample of Student Survey

At the end of our first workshop with the students, they responded to a post-workshop survey. This survey was designed for students to share what they thought about their schools and the challenges they faced in regards to equity and inclusion. Answers were collected in Google Forms and were completely anonymous. Out of approximately 60 to 75 students, we had 40 responses that were collected. One consideration on the part of unlearn for a future survey would be to allow more time for students to complete their survey. In reflection, another consideration could be for educators to conduct this survey after our time together using school devices.



Select the problems (you can select more than one) that you think need to be urgently addressed in your school community. * If not listed, please add your own:

40 responses

Figure B1. Many students felt acceptance and bullying were major concerns at their school. One interesting moment came with a student's written response. Near the bottom we had a student submit the following: “Making fun of/bringing down people's religions and beliefs (this includes all religions)”. When sharing that response out loud for the large group, many students had shared that if that was an option, it would have been the highest selected problem. This led to another obstacle with surveys as we ultimately affect the results by the choices that are available to select.