

COLOR, CULTURE AND DUAL CONSCIOUSNESS: Issues identified by South Asians Immigrant Youth in the Greater Toronto Area

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Council of Agencies Serving South Asians and the South Asian Women's Centre undertook this research to explore and document settlement issues faced by new immigrant youth of South Asian background who came to Toronto at or over the age of 8 and are now between 16 and 24. The research is part of a larger study that is examining the gaps in settlement services for newcomer youth in Ontario. This research was conducted under the aegis of the Centre of Excellence in Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) and the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University and with financial assistance from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Settlement Directorate Ontario Region.

This study has been about exploring, deciphering and decoding the lived realities of South Asian youth living in Toronto. The focus group format employed to explore the experiences of South Asian youth involved organizing groups with the diversity within the broader South Asian community in mind. Focus groups were firstly held along gender lines. Secondly, we held separate groups for Tamil youth because of their particular pre-immigration experience of civil war. Thirdly, we held separate groups for Muslim and Sikh youth since religion is a significant identifier in their lives relative to other communities now living in Toronto. There were a couple of groups that were mixed and reflected the ethno-linguist and cultural diversity within the South Asian community as a whole. However, we always maintained separation by gender.

By deciphering their experiences we begin the process of understanding of how racial and cultural differences inform their lives and sense of self or identity. We learn how they cope with the pressure by defining their sense of space and location in this society. We learn that the youth are constantly balancing the dual needs of cultural conformity and resistance without having to negate their cultural identity. Some youth cope by leading bifurcated lives straddled in two cultures. It is remarkable that in spite of having to engage in processes that require tremendous amounts of energy which could be emotionally, psychologically and physically draining, the youth manage to survive in an environment that is quite hostile to their very being. Youth in this study came across as having agency derived from a dual consciousness, a sense of active and conscious role in evolving a new culture that encompasses selected aspects of both cultures.

Without minimizing or negating the challenges that youth face in arriving at this location, perhaps being young positions them somewhat differently when compared to the parent generation. It could be that time is on their side, they have more scope to develop a hybrid culture because their ideas are not yet cemented as in the case of some of -their parents. The parents cling on to their culture to provide a sense of stability and security especially since they might have experienced a loss of social and economic status. Giving up their culture is more threatening to the parent generation than it is to the youth who are still questioning and experimenting. Moreover, youth and their parents find themselves experiencing shifts in their respective roles within the family and especially with the outside world. In the face of barriers such as language and unfamiliarity with mainstream institutions, youth often find themselves in the position of intermediary, translating, interpreting and negotiating for or on behalf of their parents. Some parents can only access mainstream institutions with their children as cultural brokers. Without the assistance of their children they are at a risk of being very isolated. This creates awkwardness for the youth and places an unwarranted burden on them. Parents on the other hand find their power, authority and ability to control their youth somewhat compromised. Needless to say, this experience of shifting roles places both parents and youth at risk with profound

implications for family dynamics. It is these differences in the existential realities between South Asian parents and children that exacerbates the already challenging process of adaptation and settlement for youth and their families.

We learn from the youth and parents that parents approve of what modernity has to offer in terms of opportunities made possible by technological progress in more advanced industrial societies such as Canada while simultaneously disapproving of "westernization" of their children. Parents approve of modernization by their children because this represents access to better education, better living standards as well as making it possible for their children to have globally portable skills and professional credentials. The parents, however, seem to reject "westernization" of their children because it is a threat to their traditional cultural beliefs, values and mores, thus strongly disapproving of South Asian youth who adopt so-called Canadian ways of dress and behaviours. The youth are thus left with struggling to maintain a balance between modernization and "westernization."

Integration is a difficult process as made abundantly clear by youth who spoke with us. It is , a challenge for service providers and especially the education system if we are to truly , facilitate this according to the principles of pluralistic integration enshrined in the Canadian , constitution, Human Rights Legislation and the Multiculturalism Act which promote the . acceptance of immigrants as full members equally entitled to the liberties and privileges . enjoyed by the rest of society. However, like the youth said, firstly, we can begin with not . taking for granted that all are comfortable and satisfied with the ways in which institutions . are structured and how they go about delivering what they are supposed to. Secondly, we . should recognize that there is broad-based acceptance that change has to happen. Thirdly, we should take action.