A case for diversity

An innovative program draws out students’ feelings about multiculturalism through art

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Though each measures just 14x12 centimetres, the CD case covers created by students at several local schools sound out big messages about racial discrimination and cultural diversity.

Some clearly spring from personal experience: “These are all the tears I’ve CRIED because of the racist things said about me, just because I am brown,” reads one on a sunshine yellow background above an inky blue sea.

Another depicts two girls standing in front of a row of lockers, with another slumped down a few lockers away. “Racism Hurts!” is written above.

Others feature hands of different shades interlaced or laid over top of one another. Many echo a simple, graphic message: “STOP RACISM”.

In all, more than 1,000 students in nearly a dozen Abbotsford schools have crafted individual responses to their multicultural reality as part of The Case Against Racism, a project run by Abbotsford Community Services’ Diversity Education and Resource Services (DEARS).
DEARS, which promotes cross-cultural understanding in the community, has delivered anti-racism workshops in schools since the mid-1990s. At the middle and high school level, the focus of the workshops has been defining racism and discrimination and talking about causes and effects, notes program co-ordinator Alison Wainwright.

“A lot of students, they don’t make the connection. They think: ‘If I tell a [racist] joke, it won’t really hurt anyone.’”

Asking students to translate their thoughts and feelings about racial discrimination into CD cover art was conceived by Abbotsford artist Stella Johnson, whom DEARS enlisted to give this year’s workshops a visual arts focus.

“She had an understanding of how you can take a social challenge or social issue and respond to that through art,” said Wainwright.

Funded by the provincial Ministry of the Attorney General, The Case Against Racism’s art seminars have been held at almost a dozen local schools since December, with Johnson wrapping up remaining workshops later this month.

Wainwright believes the seminars have resonated with students because they have used a common cultural symbol – the CD – as a basis for personal expression.

Johnson agrees.

“The program provides a safe, non-judgmental venue for informal dialogue with the students and provides an opportunity for students to share their personal points of view, opinions and experiences on racism and diversity with their classmates.”

Providing Abbotsford’s youth with creative outlets to talk about cultural diversity is particularly important in light of the city’s increasingly multicultural mix.

Results from the 2001 Census indicate Abbotsford has the third highest proportion of visible minorities in Canada, behind Vancouver and Toronto. The census found 20 per cent of Abbotsford’s residents were visible minorities in 2001, with almost 75 per cent of that group of South Asian background.

Other local agencies are also joining the dialogue about cultural diversity. The City of Abbotsford highlighted challenges of serving a diverse community in a report to council last April, Abbotsford Cares: Agenda for Social Planning in the City of Abbotsford. In it, diversity and inclusion is flagged as one of the city’s top nine priorities. As a result, the new Abbotsford Social Development Advisory Committee was formed last year to address these issues.

The Abbotsford Police Department has also begun to ask how it can best police a multicultural community with its chief constable’s diversity advisory committee – established in November 2006 – to address diversity issues relating to ethnicity and culture, as well as sexual orientation, age and disability.

Abbotsford’s diverse community has definitely been a motivation behind The Case Against Racism, adds Wainwright.

“Part of doing anti-racism work and multiculturalism work is to try to encourage people not to be racist towards one another and to build relationships between people.”

If feedback from participating schools is any indication, The Case Against Racism has done just that.

Grace Okello, a Grade 8 student at participating school, Eugene Reimer Middle, said the art project gave students an understanding of racism.

“It was cool because we learned about it and it was good to know even little kids think it’s not good to be racist.”

Marlaine Louis, the youth care worker at William A. Fraser Middle, where the entire student body participated in the CD case project, has even heard that student behaviour has changed since Johnson visited the school in January.

“Students have come to me to talk about it and say some of the things they saw have stopped or reduced since.”

The CD covers created as part of The Case Against Racism project will be on display March 29 at an open house at Robert Bateman Secondary from 6-8 p.m. to commemorate March 21, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. For information about the open house or the DEARS program, call 604-859-7681, local 270.

“Photographs, from far left to right: students Grace Okello and Levi Flokstra at Eugene Reimer School; “Racism hurts me inside. It’s like a cut that keeps bleeding and hurting,” says Abbotsford School of Integrated Arts student Ben Friesen works on an anti-racism project; participant Ryan Brar at Eugene Reimer School; Alison Wainwright, of Abbotsford Community Services, co-ordinates The Case Against Racism.”

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