

# The 2020 Human Rights Learning Forum

*'We need to talk; It's about systemic racism'.*

## Summary Report

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## Executive Summary

### *We need to talk – It's about Systemic Racism*

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#### 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Human Rights Learning Forum

The Ottawa Police Service (OPS) and Community Equity Council (CEC) virtually hosted the *6<sup>th</sup> Annual Human Rights Learning Forum: We need to talk – It's about Systemic Racism* on December 10, 2020. The event was focused on meaningful dialogue. It aimed to provide opportunities to share and learn from lived experiences, with the intent of engaging the public, community partners, and OPS members in meaningful dialogue on systemic racism in order to deepen collective understanding.

The half-day event was held on a virtual Zoom platform and drew just over 170 participants. Approximately 29% of participants were affiliated with community organizations or associations, 17% were service providers, and another 20% were members of the OPS. Other participants included city councilors, as well as individuals from government, universities, emergency services, and local unions.

*"We always work to turn the conversation around to where we are going,"* said Sahada Aloo, CEC Co-Chair, as she welcomed participants to the Forum. *"We are on a journey to ending racism."* Forum facilitator Lise Clement provided a working definition of systemic racism, synthesized from various Ontario Human Rights Commission materials, for the purpose of the Forum's discussion.

*Systemic racism is a form of systemic discrimination defined as patterns of behaviour, policies or practices that are part of the social or administrative structures of an organization, which create or perpetuate disadvantage for marginalized persons. These behaviours, policies or practices may appear to be neutral on the surface but can have discriminatory effects on individuals who identify with one or more of the protected grounds defined in the Ontario Human Rights Code.*

In his opening comments, Deputy Chief Steve Bell affirmed the commitment of the OPS to continued, meaningful action that would continue to address systemic racism within the service.

Panelists Jephtee Elysee, Manager Gender and Race Equity, Indigenous Relations, Diversity and Inclusion Branch at the City of Ottawa; Shirley Cuillierier, retired RCMP Assistant Commissioner; Carl Cartwright, OPS Inspector; and Gerard Etienne, CEC Co-Chair, shared their perspectives on, and personal experiences with, racism. *"We are now facing some of the most difficult times in community-police relationships and racial divide in North*

America," said Inspector Cartright. While he admitted he is exhausted, as are many other Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC), "*this is an opportunity to make meaningful and impactful change that we cannot miss.*" Similarly, Mr. Etienne encouraged participants to be 'change agents' needed in Ottawa.

Following a short CBC video about systemic racism, participants were directed into nine breakout sessions where open dialogue was facilitated by volunteers from the community. Over the course of an hour, they shared reflections on the panel discussion and responded to questions such as 'What does systemic racism in policing mean to you?' They also made recommendations to address systemic racism, such as increasing efforts to promote and celebrate diversity within OPS. Comments and key takeaways were shared with the broader group after breakout sessions ended.

Before the end of the Forum, Abid Jan, Rapid Response Team Lead for United for All Anti Hate Coalition; Mr. Etienne; and Deputy Chief Bell provided updates on what the OPS, in partnership with community stakeholder agencies, has been doing over the past year, as well as plans in place for the year ahead. The Forum ended with closing comments from Ms. Alolo and Chief Sloly, and a closing song from Elder Irene Compton.

## Overview

### *We need to talk – It's about Systemic Racism*

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#### 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Human Rights Learning Forum

The 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Human Rights Learning Forum: *We need to talk: It's about Systemic Racism* was a virtual event hosted by the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) and the Community Equity Council (CEC) on December 10, 2020. The Forum was focused on meaningful dialogue aimed at providing avenues for personal and collective learning and growth and identifying opportunities to learn from lived experiences. The intent was to engage the public, community partners, and OPS members in meaningful dialogue on systemic racism in order to deepen collective understanding. Key objectives included:

- to hold a safe space to have meaningful dialogue on systemic racism,
- to provide avenues for personal and collective learning and growth,
- to learn from examples, and
- to urge us to take personal and collective action.

The afternoon event, hosted on the virtual platform of Zoom, drew just over 170 participants, and was facilitated by Lise Clément from Lansdowne Consulting Group. Approximately 29% of participants were affiliated with community organizations or associations, 17% were service providers, and another 20% were members of the OPS. Other participants included city councilors, as well as individuals from government, universities, emergency services, and local unions.

As with previous OPS Human Rights Learning Forums, this event sought to facilitate a meaningful dialogue between the community and OPS members. OPS shared how knowledge gained from previous forums has been applied within the Service, leading to the development and implementation of the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Action Plan. In order to continue advancing and enhancing the organizational culture change, participants were asked to help identify undercurrents of systemic racism so as to deepen collective understanding of the issue.

## Opening Remarks

Chief Peter Sloly welcomed participants, then asked Elder Verna McGregor to open the Forum. Elder McGregor, from the First Nation Algonquin community of Kitigan Zibi, noted the significance of holding this forum in Ottawa, a place that has historically been one of gathering and ceremony for the Algonquin people. She offered a prayer and blessing for this meeting.

Chief Sloy then invited June Girvan, founder of the J'Nikira Dinqinesh Education Centre in Ottawa, to read the 'Reconciliation Day Proclamation' of 2020 from Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson which celebrates the human rights legacies of notable community members, including OPS Sergeant John Kiss.<sup>1</sup>

Sahada Alolo, CEC Co-Chair, also welcomed participants to the virtual event. "We always work to turn the conversation around to where we are going," she said. "We are on a journey to ending racism. We need to identify racism, understand and analyze how it exists in our communities." She stressed that systemic racism is an everyday experience of racialized and faith-based communities and expressed hope that this forum would allow for meaningful dialogue to deepen understanding of such experiences.

In order to begin the dialogue with a clear focus, Ms. Clément shared a definition of systemic racism intended for discussion purposes at the Forum. It was synthesized from various Ontario Human Rights Commission reference materials.

*Systemic racism is a form of systemic discrimination defined as patterns of behaviour, policies or practices that are part of the social or administrative structures of an organization, which create or perpetuate disadvantage for marginalized persons. These behaviours, policies or practices may appear to be neutral on the surface but can have discriminatory effects on individuals who identify with one or more of the protected grounds defined in the Ontario Human Rights Code.*

The OPS continues to work jointly with its community partners, the CEC, and Ottawa City's Partner and Stakeholder Initiatives Branch, to develop and adopt a more robust version that is tailored to the needs of Ottawa communities, including OPS.

In his opening comments, Deputy Chief Steve Bell, the Executive Sponsor of the EDI Action Plan, acknowledged that the OPS can do better to be equally inclusive of everyone who calls Ottawa home, including those who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQ. While recognizing that the Service is not moving fast enough to satisfy everyone, he said, "we are committed to addressing systemic racism in our institution," and articulated the work that has already been done as well as plans for future actions. Of particular note is the newly-announced development of a three-year, community-led, mental health strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Reconciliation Day in Ottawa marks Human Rights Day, the anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (December 10, 1948) and the 5th anniversary of the Truth and Reconciliation's Calls to Action (December 15, 2015).

## Deepening our Collective Understanding of Systemic Racism: Panel

Four panelists, sharing both personal and professional experiences, started the dialogue on how systemic racism can be defined, and how it is experienced.

The first to speak was **Jephthee Elysee**, Manager Gender and Race Equity, Indigenous Relations, Diversity and Inclusion Branch at the City of Ottawa. She noted that confronting systemic racism is a priority at the City, and current policies and practices are being examined for their impacts on racialized people. She said there is a recognized need to understand problems clearly before they can be addressed. This includes the need to understand diverse experiences of people in different geographies and urban areas. She also noted that racism is a public health issue, with demonstrable physical and mental health effects, as has recently been recognized by Dr. Vera Etches, Ottawa's Medical Officer of Health. "*The urgency of anti-racism has only grown since July 2020,*" she said, adding that everyone is included in the work that needs to be done.

**Shirley Cuillierier**, retired RCMP Assistant Commissioner and a Mohawk of Kanasatake, spoke next. She began by relaying a definition of systemic racism offered by Senator Murray Sinclair:

*"Some people believe that systemic racism is when everyone in the system is a racist. There is no system where everybody is a racist. Systemic racism is when the system itself is based upon and founded upon racist beliefs and philosophies and thinking and has put in place policies and practices that force even the non-racists to act in a racist way. "*

Ms. Cuillierier noted that the issues being discussed at this forum were "deeply personal" to her, and she shared her experiences of growing up with a Mohawk mother who held deep sorrow from a lifetime of experiences of racism. Ms. Cuillierier also relayed how she had struggled to understand her role as a RCMP officer, recognizing the RCMP's part in colonization and then witnessing the Oka crisis of 1990. Yet her grandfather encouraged her to stay with the RCMP, telling her she should "make changes from the inside because it would be more difficult to do so from the outside." She did stay, and went on to influence the institution and challenge its internal culture.

Despite the work that has been done, Ms. Cuillierier reminded participants that much is left to do. She pointed to evidence of on-going systemic racism in Canada, such as the lack of clean drinking water in many Indigenous communities, the high levels of youth suicide, the

over-representation of Indigenous children in child services, and the recent death of Joyce Echaquan.<sup>2</sup>

Ms. Cuillierier urged members of the OPS to recognize their role as leaders in the community, and the power they hold as officers, including the right to lawfully deprive someone of their freedom. *“Don’t take power for granted,”* she said, adding that success lies in building trust and mutual respect, and in having difficult conversations like these.

Like Ms. Cuillierier, **Carl Cartright**, OPS Inspector, Major Investigations Branch, said he was drained by this past year. He had agreed to be part of this panel, and kept that promise. *“I am a man of my word. So, I am with you here today,”* he said. *“But I did struggle, because honestly, I am tired, I am actually fatigued. I’m fatigued of talking about the subject because 2020 has been a difficult year.”* Still, he hoped this conversation would lead to others. *“We are now facing some of the most difficult times in community-police relationships and racial divide in North America,”* he said. As challenging as this is, he said it is also an opportunity to make meaningful and impactful change.

Inspector Cartright also shared his lived experiences, growing up as the child of Haitian immigrants, and experiencing racism and bullying. *“I was never equal when I was growing up,”* he said. When he joined the OPS, he was told he had been hired ‘because he was Black’. He described being Black and a police officer as a difficult “duality”. *“If people say they don’t see me as Black, then I say you don’t see me,”* he said. *“I’m a Black man in every experience that I have. How I see the world is coloured by how the world has treated me.”*

**Gerard Etienne**, CEC Co-Chair, was the fourth panelist. He began by relaying words of wisdom he learned from an Indigenous Elder: *“The longest distance you will travel is from your head to your heart.”* *Rules and policies are in the head, but change needs to happen in the heart. He challenged participants of the Forum to be the ‘agents of change’* this city needs.

Mr. Etienne also shared the analogy of living in a house that was built for giraffes; when elephants try to move in, they are told they need to adapt to be like giraffes. Similarly, this country has built systems that accommodate only certain people. Now, when others arrive, they are told they need to put aside what makes them unique and adjust themselves to a ‘house’ that was never built for them. *“There are foundations of the house that are solid,”* Mr. Etienne said. *“Let’s keep them. But let’s rebuild the house so that it works both for*

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<sup>2</sup> Joyce Echaquan was an Indigenous woman who died in September 2020 in Saint-Charles-Borromée, Quebec. Before her death, she recorded a Facebook Live video that showed her screaming in distress while healthcare workers berated and insulted her.



*giraffes and for elephants.*" He added that some people might think they will lose something if the house is changed, instead of realizing they will be gaining a better house.

## Understanding systemic racism: Breakout Sessions

Following a brief CBC documentary titled 'What systemic racism in Canada looks like',<sup>3</sup> participants were directed into nine breakout sessions in which open dialogue was facilitated by volunteers from the community. Over the course of an hour, participants shared their understandings of, and experiences with, systemic racism; reflected on the panelists' comments, and offered suggestions for addressing systemic racism. Suggestions included increasing diversity within OPS, changing police policies and practices, increasing community engagement, as well as implementing measures to promote anti-racism (for a detailed list of captured comments, see Appendix A).

Overall, participants reported engaging in breakout session conversations that were marked by 'comfort and curiosity'. "*Today was a lightbulb moment,*" said one OPS member. Another participant noted that these conversations are 'extremely difficult', but necessary. Others expressed new-found hope about the OPS-community relationship moving forward. "*It is good that we are all sitting here today having this conversation,*" said a community member. "*It's a beginning. Let's work. I'm ready to work.*"

In discussions about **systemic racism**, there were calls for the police to acknowledge systemic bias and recognize that legislated frameworks of policing were built decades ago by white men. The systems that have been established do not mean the same thing to everyone. Sometimes 'law and order' is weaponized against racialized communities. Addressing systemic racism will require a culture change, courage within leadership, and personal engagement from individuals.

To address systemic racism, multiple calls were made for more **diversity** within OPS. This includes not only diversity of personnel, reflecting multiple racialized groups, but also diversity of thought. Participants said that diversity is not currently celebrated within the Service. Racialized members still face discrimination, and there is pushback internally and externally on efforts to increase diversity through changes to hiring practices. Concerns were also expressed that racialized or Indigenous candidates should not have to be spokespersons for all from their communities, and that simply hiring more diverse people will not on its own change the culture.

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<sup>3</sup> The documentary is available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/7GmX5stT9rU>

Addressing systemic racism will require adapting **police policies and practices**. The OPS should recognize that current and past practices, like street checks, have contributed to systemic racism, even if that was not the intent. Changes must be made to legislation and directives; specific guidelines are needed to ensure implementation. Policies need to improve the lives of people in the community. One suggested example is if a policy doesn't pass the 'Black test', throw it out. There were also calls from the community for police to recognize that they are the gateway of the criminal justice system, and once people get into that system, they face additional layers of systemic bias.

Addressing systemic racism also requires **community engagement**. Trust has to be built; and the OPS could do more to connect with communities with which they are not currently engaged. Members of the OPS recognized the need to be open and vulnerable, to meet community members at *their* tables, and really listen to their experiences and perspectives. Changes that come from these conversations need to be co-created with the community, and need to build on previous discussions and lessons learned. The Service was also encouraged to recognize that community members need to know the plans going forward, and hear about efforts underway.

Finally, promoting **anti-racism** requires starting with the assumption that racism exists. Being anti-racist involves learning about yourself and having the humility to change. It also means acknowledging and addressing personal and systemic biases and working to promote cultural change. It involves recognizing and addressing exclusions, and articulating what inclusion means. Being anti-racist also means recognizing and welcoming diversity and acknowledging the suffering of others.

## Addressing systemic racism: Panel

Following the breakout sessions and debrief, a final panel provided updates on what the community and OPS have been doing over the past year, and the plans in place for the year ahead.

Abid Jan, Director of Capacity Building for the United Way, and Rapid Response Team Lead for United for All Anti Hate Coalition,<sup>4</sup> spoke of the need to address root causes of marginalization, including economic challenges. He presented a ten-point action plan currently being implemented. Gerard Etienne spoke of the value of action at multiple levels, from those protesting the status quo, to those sitting down at the table to engage in dialogue. "*We may not see the change immediately,*" he said, adding that cultural change

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<sup>4</sup> United for All (U4A) is an Ottawa coalition that is led by the City of Ottawa, United Way East Ontario, and the OPS. U4A, in partnership with 70 other community agencies and organizations, coordinates local efforts to overcome hate and violence in the city.

will require sustained, collective efforts. But he noted optimistically that he has never seen the OPS more focused on listening to the community than they have been in the past two years.

Deputy Chief Bell pointed to improvements that have been made within the OPS, such as the continued development and growth of the CEC, the development of the EDI Action Plan, the implementation of workplace sexual violence and harassment policies, the restructuring and enhancement of the Hate Crime unit, changes to de-escalation training, and the realignment of service delivery through Neighbourhood Resource Teams.

*“We have more work to do,” he said. “We recognize that we have a way to go. But we want you to hear that you have our commitment to move this work ahead.”*

## Final Remarks

In closing comments, Ms. Alolo noted again that many are tired of the struggle against racism. *“The onus should not be on those seeking equity to bring the change,”* she said, echoing the call made throughout the Forum that others need to join in efforts to address systemic racism. Chief Sloly reiterated his commitment to making the OPS “an institution deserving of people’s trust” and thanked everyone for sharing their experiences and holding the Service to account.

*“Change will not happen just by change in leadership on the inside, or just by activism on the outside,”* he said, it needs to be pushed and encouraged from the outside, implemented on the inside. *“It must be all of us championing these issues.”*

Elder Irene Compton, a Saulteaux woman of the Bear Clan and a CEC member, closed the session with the ‘Ancestor’s Song’, acknowledging that participants had been sitting in council with each other, as well as with those who have gone before.

## Key Recommendations

The consensus of the project committee for this year’s forum was to engage in meaningful dialogue focused on sharing and learning rather than problem solving and strategizing. Comments and sentiments were captured from group facilitator notes, an open online chat room and a plenary discussion. Key themes developed organically from a place of respect and trust; listening and learning from the lived experiences shared by the public, community partners, and OPS members. Participants’ guidance to the OPS generally pertained to six key themes. (see Appendix A)

1. Systemic issues
2. Need for diversity within OPS
3. Address police policies
4. Address police practices
5. Deeper engagement with the community
6. Address Anti-racism

## Conclusion

Our panelists touched the hearts of 200 registered participants; representing over 57 agencies, leading us through the journey of some of their most vulnerable moments and to help us understand and learn from their challenges and successes. And while the discussions amongst the participants on this year's topic of systemic racism were sometimes difficult and passionate, they remained respectful, understanding and informative. In the end the message was clear; we need to listen more, be honest and open to making change.

# Appendix A – Breakout discussions

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Breakout sessions were not electronically recorded in order to allow for free sharing of thoughts and experiences. However, volunteer community facilitators took notes to capture key ideas, which were then shared with the broader group.

Facilitators allowed for open dialogue and reflection on the panelists' comments, but also referenced the following questions to guide conversation where required.

- How will we know we are making progress on systemic racism?
  - What might that look like in our community and in policing?
  - What else might we do, individually, collectively and/or within the police service to address systemic racism?
- What does it mean to be anti-racist?

Comments are not attributed to participants who made them, however, where relevant, comments from OPS members are indicated by “(OPS)”.

## 1. Systemic issues

- Importance of careful reflection and acknowledgment of systemic bias throughout the system.
  - Policing and legislative frameworks reflect the fact they were built decades ago, drafted by white males ... widespread impact on systems.
  - There is a system – an old boys club, people 'need to fit' into the system.
- Cultural changes needed in OPS.
  - The culture that allows police officers to be able to discriminate and be racist, with impunity.
  - Definitely there is systemic racism in OPS. We need to continue to challenge ourselves (OPS).
- Law and order doesn't mean the same thing to everyone, sometimes it's weaponized against racialized communities.
- Need people with courage, especially in leadership.
- Need candid acknowledgements of both past and present examples of systemic racism in policing.
- OPS needs to define what inclusion means for them.

## 2. Need for diversity within OPS

- Need to diversify, including a diversity of thought.
  - Minority officers need to be encouraged to use their voice.
  - Racialized or Indigenous candidates shouldn't have to be the spokespersons for all from their community.
- Ensure that there is greater representation of diversity – not just one group. Not one by one, but as a collective.
- Diversity is still not celebrated in policing.

- There are racialized people who join the service, the service discriminates against them. The culture in the police force does not allow them to climb the ladder.
- The house needs to accommodate the people it wasn't built for – recognize and adapt to the diversity of people who are coming in.
- Need for change in the hiring practices.
  - Hiring has been based on certain (biased, outdated) standards.
  - The process needs to better understand the individuality of those applicants.
  - We have been breaking down those barriers – we had to go out into the communities, and to look at the systems and barriers in place, like costs for testing (OPS).
  - The increases in diversity we are now seeing are a result of new community engagement models (OPS).
  - Hire more Black officers.
- There has been pushback on increasing diversity.
  - The difficulties internally and externally. Some people felt the changes weren't fair. Hard to get the message of equity across (OPS).
  - There needs to be recognition that when racialized people enter the organization, they jump through the same hoops. You need to trust that they were brought in on merit, on skills (OPS).
  - Officers need to respect one another.
- [Comments from chat] Diversifying a practice designed to exclude people doesn't change the system – no matter who takes up the roles. Plenty of examples where diversifying doesn't work. You either fit the mold of the institutions, or risk being targeted, isolated and attacked. Definitely not enough to hire diverse.

### 3. Address police policies

- There needs to be changes in policies, legislation, directives, and specific guidelines for implementation.
- Policies need to be reviewed and changed, but the policies need to improve the lives of people in the community. If a policy doesn't pass the 'Black test', then throw it out.
- Connection between the heart and mind – that's how we need to connect to all the systems. Policies are good – but they are the mind part. Have to have emotional, physical and spiritual parts.

### 4. Address police practices

- Both previous and current practices in policing have contributed to systemic racism, e.g., street checks. These were not necessarily malicious or intentional, but have had significant impacts nonetheless (OPS).
- Policies and procedures need to be reviewed with anti-racism lens and changes need to be made. Policies need to pass the Black test for example.
- Need to take advantage of this crisis to make change.
  - Some worries about police legitimacy going forward based on recent events and trends.

- Address issue of personal accountability for police officers. Qualified immunity needs to be removed.
- Evaluate of use of force by police.
- Need to measure. When we measure, we can identify gaps; when we identify gaps, we can develop strategies to do better. If we don't measure it, we won't make as much progress as we could (OPS).
  - Collect more data.
- Would like to see more of an understanding that the police are the gateway of the criminal justice system. The second people get into the system, they face another set of layers of systemic bias. Things like pre-charge diversion should be used more frequently.
- There is a lot to be said when you can get to know someone on a personal level – can give them more support. We tend to get complacent in just reacting (OPS).

## 5. Engage with the community

- Recognize that the relationship between community and police is not a broken relationship. It's a relationship that was never healthy. There is a lot of trauma, a lot of mistrust. Trust has to be built
- Things need to move faster so people see changes.
  - Ensure communication of changes is made public.
  - Account for, and build on, years of Human Rights Learning Forums.
  - There is a real need to know what the plan is going forward – recognize that change needs to happen.
- We have to co-create what we do with the community (OPS).
  - Long due for partnership action.
  - Connect with communities not directly engaged with OPS.
- Need for positive engagement. Positive encounters in a social way – community events, pow wows.
- Be open and willing to be brave and to be vulnerable. Once you start having these conversations, hearing the lived experiences - use these experiences to do better. Meet other groups at their table and really listen. Then reassess how we do things (OPS).
  - There is power in storytelling. We have to be comfortable enough to share the stories, and have to be ready to hear those stories.
- Standout word – community. Worry about perception that police officers are inherently good and community inherently bad. Need to increase understanding.
- Be the change you want to see in the world. Consider joining the CEC.
- CEC should have a scheduled meeting with the OPS Board, not just the leadership.

## 6. Anti-racism

- Anti-racism is more a verb than a noun. Day to day, how can we shift conversations and workplaces to be inclusive? Start with community, family, and friends – where trust already exists. Continue building momentum.
  - Challenge racist acts and comments; don't let them slide by.
- Addressing racism – start with the assumption that it does exist.

- To be anti-racist, one has to recognize that one has been racist. Need to move beyond being an ally. Need to be an accomplice. Move toward being an advocate.
- To be anti-racist is to learn about yourself. Being white - we need to learn about ourselves. We typically don't see dangers associated with our cultural backgrounds.
  - Have the humility to accept and work on yourself. Challenge your own behaviours.
  - There needs to be personal work.
- Everyone has biases and these need to be addressed by both individuals and institutions.
- Cultural change is important.
  - Change culture of assumptions as we move forward.
- Recognize others.
  - Recognize that different doesn't equal deviant or suspicious.
  - Recognize the suffering of people and their human rights.
- Being racialized - we feel it, but feel we cannot cry for help.
- Address the issue of exclusion. Addressing system racism without inclusion is not complete.
- Address different racisms – we have curriculum on anti-racism, but need to have strategies for different racisms – anti-Black, anti-Indigenous (OPS).
- Educate everyone – from kids to police.