

Summary: Issues, Challenges and Barriers Faced by Immigrant and Culturally Diverse Artists in Toronto and Scarborough



A Scarborough Arts & Culture Initiative

*Creative Mosaics: Mentoring in Community Arts & Culture
A Needs & Capacity Assessment, 2010*

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The Creative Mosaics Project

In 2010, Scarborough Arts Council (SAC) collaborated with a range of organizations including Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAS), Catholic Crosscultural Services (CCS) and Cultural Pluralism in Performing Arts Movement Ontario (CPPAMO) to work on a new project entitled *Creative Mosaics: Mentoring in Community Arts and Culture – A Needs and Capacity Assessment*. Creative Mosaics was a one-year initiative funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, which aimed to identify and respond to the lack of culturally diverse arts and cultural programs in Scarborough, Ontario.

Creative Mosaics involved a series of elementary school focus group discussions, key informant interviews, roundtable discussions, an online survey and a literature review. The online survey, which focused on gathering information on the interest and needs of culturally diverse arts and culture programs in Scarborough, revealed that there are a number of barriers and challenges that immigrant and culturally diverse artists face: racial and ethnic discrimination, language barriers, lack of networking opportunities and unknown or limited funding opportunities. Six key informant interviews were conducted to explore these issues further.

Method

Identifying and Recruiting Participants

A 'call-for-artists' was solicited by email to arts organizations, community groups and individual artists in November 2010. Key informants were recruited on the basis of their artistic background, experience and interest. The participants involved in the research were from a range of artistic backgrounds, levels of experiences, gender, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and age groups. From November – December 2010, the interviews were conducted face-to-face, by phone and by email correspondence. Interviews were approximately thirty to forty-five minutes in length and were audio recorded. The interviews were then transcribed and a complete analysis of the information was conducted. Please refer to the appendices for the key informant interview questions and consent form.

Key Informant Interviews

The main goal of the six key informant interviews was to explore the personal experiences, both positive and negative, of culturally diverse artists in order to gain a better understanding of the key issues, challenges and barriers they face. Information gathered reflects the artists' work as individuals and within the community, specifically in the areas of Toronto and Scarborough.

This anecdotal evidence provides further understanding of relevant issues surrounding diversity in the arts, including racism, discrimination, social isolation, accessibility, and lack of support. The findings identify a number of barriers to the inclusion of artists from diverse cultural backgrounds and establish ways in which arts organizations can best support these artists. The research may be of assistance to organizations seeking to respond to the needs of immigrant and culturally diverse artists and the lack of arts and cultural programming.

Limitations

The limitation to the research is that the findings presented cannot be generalized to the larger population of ethno-racial and immigrant artists in Toronto and Scarborough based on this study alone. The research used a small sample size of individuals and cannot illustrate the complete picture of the issues that ethno-racial and immigrant artists encounter. In spite of this, the research provides insight into the lived experiences of artist from diverse cultural backgrounds and provides a foundation on which to further draw parallels to the experiences of ethno-racial and immigrant artists.

Key Findings

The issues and challenges faced by artists of colour and immigrant artists living and working in Toronto and Scarborough are not homogenous. Experiences of the key informants varied based on their individual experience based on their gender, racial, cultural, ethnic, social background and artistic practice. However, many of the key informants expressed similar experiences they faced as artists working in the arts and culture sector. From the six interviews eight distinct themes were identified:

Lack of ethno-racial representation: Three key informants identified that there is a strong presence of white artists in the professional performing arts scene, and an absence of artists of colour in the performing arts sector which does not adequately represent the stories and diversity that exists in Toronto and Canada.

Feelings of discrimination: Two key informants expressed experiences of ethnic and racial prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination, specifically in the performing arts sector. Acting roles and opportunities to practice artistic work are often stereotypical, ethnic-specific and race-related.

Difficulty in gaining recognition and exposure: Three key informants identified that arts institutions/organizations are often not inclusive, despite continued discourse in the arts community surrounding diversity.

Language as a barrier: One key informant shared his experience of exclusion due to language; providing insight on how immigrant artists who speak little or no English face isolation. Language barriers impair the connection between new artists, a new community, and gaining access to the Canadian art industry.

Limited funding and lack of information on available funding: Four key informants addressed how immigrant artists and artists from diverse backgrounds have difficulty accessing funding, and accessing knowledge about funding. In addition, the community arts sector tends to have less financial options than the traditional arts sector.

Challenges with networking: Three key informants identified challenges with networking; wherein artists face a lack of social networking opportunities, from providing opportunities for

young emerging artists or colour to build connections, to providing a platform for new immigrant artists

Meaningful intercultural interactions and dialogue: Five key informants expressed the need for the Canadian arts industry and the education system to be more inclusive by supporting, encouraging and developing artistic work that speaks to the stories and histories of the diverse communities in Canada.

Youth opportunities in the arts: Four key informants addressed the need for the Canadian arts industry to provide creative and artistic outlets for children and youth to grow, express themselves and gain experiential learning – especially in underserved areas of Toronto and Scarborough.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The interviews conducted with the key informants, illuminate some of the challenges and barriers that immigrant and culturally diverse artists face as they build careers in the arts and culture sector in Toronto and Scarborough. The interviews reveal the need for an open discourse and in-depth analysis of the current racial, ethnic and linguistic landscape present in the arts sector that affects the lived experiences of immigrant and culturally diverse artists, art professionals and cultural workers. A good starting point to begin this discussion include: the lack of ethno-racial representation, stereotyping, difficulty gaining recognition, language barriers, funding and networking opportunities, and the need for arts and cultural programming for children and youth that facilitate intercultural dialogue.

Toronto remains the most ethno-culturally diverse city in Canada; and one of the most diverse cities in the world. According to Statistics Canada, visible minorities will form more than half the population of the GTA by 2017. Given the increasing diversity of our population, the need to better understand the experiences of immigrant and culturally diverse artists, art professionals and cultural workers is clearer than ever. In identifying and effectively addressing these artists' needs, barriers to inclusion can be identified and dismantled, inclusive arts practices and programming can be established, and better strategies to connect artists of diverse cultural backgrounds with existing services and opportunities can be provided.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations based on the key issues, challenges and barriers expressed during the interviews:

- Continue to request, encourage and support diverse stories, representations and artistic forms that reflect the diverse cultural voices of Canada's artists to challenge current stereotypes and race-related representations.
- Review current practices in place in the selection processes of funding arts programs and the recruitment of artists in performing arts.
- Encourage arts institutions and organizations to be more inclusive of the particular needs of newcomer artists.

- Establish a platform for immigrant and culturally diverse artists to showcase their arts within the public sphere and receive recognition for their work, creating equal opportunities for emerging and existing artists from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Provide mentorships, skill development, and events for emerging and existing artists from diverse cultural backgrounds to communicate and share their needs, experiences, and ideas of establishing a career within the arts and cultural field.
- Explore the overt and subtle language issues that can often impair the interaction between immigrant artists and their new community to better support artists' whose first language is not English.
- Increase financial support to organizations and artists that support non-traditional art forms and arts programming that foster intercultural dialogue and artistic expression to help address 'the undervaluing of arts and culture'.
- Create networking events that offer opportunities for immigrant artists of diverse cultural backgrounds to build connections in the arts community and learn and grow artistically in their new home country.
- Find better strategies to outreach to immigrant artists and artists from diverse cultural backgrounds about existing and available funding sources, services and opportunities.
- Establish opportunities for meaningful intercultural dialogue where non-immigrant artists and audiences can learn about diverse artistic practices and build intercultural understanding through the arts across cultures.
- Increase funding in the community arts sector to provide youth, specifically those in underserved areas, opportunities for growth through arts and cultural programming.