

The Henceforward Episode 18

Safety for Who?

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Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast about connections between Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island. Here we come to the table to discuss settler colonialism and anti-blackness but more, to imagine shared futures and the practices of theory and care that it will take to get there, to get elsewhere.

Jessamyn: Hello. I'm Jessamyn Polson. Simone Weir, Kate Curtis and I will be directing your listening experience in this episode of The Henceforward. In this episode, we engage in conversations about the surveillance of Black undocumented and racialized youth in the Toronto District School Board or TDSB for short. We begin with a kitchen table discussion, followed by interviews with Gita Madan and Tanya Aberman. Thanks for listening.

Sandi: Welcome to the kitchen table where Indigenous folks and Black folks come to meet to discuss some very serious topics. I'm Sandi Wemigwase.

Sandy: I am Sandy Hudson.

Jade: I'm Jade Nixon.

Cornel: I'm Cornel Grey.

Michelle: I'm Michelle Forde.

Megan: And I'm Megan Scribe.

Cornel: What was your experience like growing up? Were you in the TDSB? I don't know, sorry.

Michelle: I need a moment to think because there's a lot that I can say, but there's a lot that I can't say. Okay, so there are structures in place that are supposedly for safety. Questions that come to mind, who are we thinking of? Systems, in terms of systems, school systems, administration, board, directives, when we use the word safety, who's privileged within that, and who's on the outside? I think there are a lot of problems, and I'm speaking as a teacher within the TDSB.

One of the examples of safety and the problems around this would be School Resource Officers, even the issue of naming and the words that we use, the language that we use to cover over what is really at work, what's operating. What I've seen personally are School Resource Officers, police officers that use their

access to strategically surveil Black and racialized youth that it's really just a way of reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline.

So, in terms of anti-blackness and the ways in which schools oftentimes are hostile spaces, youths are aware of this, and it's important to find ways to honor and give space to those voices that challenge the narratives of this building of safety, the project of safety and who is being protected and who is being surveilled.

Even as we go through this process, this discussion now, I'm being very vague because there are a lot of troublesome, politically messed up things and violent things that I can't even speak to in this podcast, but just suffice to say that we need to take a very close look at the way that safety is being taken up in schools and who is on the outside of those conversations and the tools that are being put forth, like resource officers, what are we aiming to achieve, how is it being given to these individuals; and we should constantly be just vigilant about what the real project is, hidden by the language that smooths it all over.

Cornel: If we're talking about safety for Black students in the school system, I'm also thinking of the concept of safe spaces which gets brought up in a number of places these days. Anytime you share that safety can be achieved for Black students within that kind of environment, we know that, in some context, the physical infrastructure of that school has become militarized in certain ways.

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I've heard, I don't know the literature, extensively, on this, but I've heard the zero tolerance policy has a particular anti-black history as well. We can talk about the curriculum and the fact that the majority of Black students in the school system do not see themselves represented or see themselves representing in very narrow, limited ways.

I'm thinking too, of that video that was circulated, I think it was sometime last year or the year before, of a police officer basically... It was in a classroom where the young Black girl was accosted or thrown over while she was in the classroom. If it is that schools are supposed to be "a safe space" for students, what do we make of the fact that something like -- again, we, people, also think about how the police is supposed to protect us too, right? So what does it mean that a police officer can do something, treat a young Black child like that with such disregard?

I've heard stories too, of police officers engaging with students, Black students specifically, outside of school hours, just imagine, making sure that, up to no good, as it were. I didn't grow up in Canada, so I don't really have any firsthand experience of that but, yeah, I'm not sure what safety looks like or if that's a real thing for Black students in the school. We can even think about the recent case of, what's her name, Nancy Elgie? The York --

Michelle: Yes, the trustee.

Cornel: The trustee who made a racial slur against a Black parent. I'm sure there are numerous examples. I actually have a student who was telling me, a while back, a couple of months ago actually, that her teacher at that time made some comment, because I guess she was casually seeing this white male student, and she said something like, "Oh, so that's your way out, right," as if to say that proximity to whiteness grants one a -- I mean, there's a racist underpinning there.

Another student was telling me about the fact that she was automatically put into -- I'm not sure how it's called, a remedial class? -- because it was an assumption that she couldn't speak English well as an immigrant or students who are placed outside of the classrooms for no reason at all as a form of punishment. So I think lack of safety is both a structural issue, but also in terms of the kinds of administrators that are in these classrooms as well, that's something that we need to think about a little bit more.

Sandi: Right, it's like asking the question, *safety for who?* Who are they protecting?

Cornel: Yeah.

Sandi: Because they're not there to protect Black students, they're there to protect the white students from Black students.

Michelle: What's so critical about the point that you brought up, Cornel, the trustee, Nancy Elgie, in York Region, so many administrators respond to that by pointing to her as an anomaly. It's important to also include the fact that that slur came out when she was in a board meeting, surrounded by board officials, and she used the slur against a parent who was there for the express purpose of making a human rights complaint on behalf of her son who experienced years of anti-Black racism within his school. It's so reflective of structures, the ways in which the structures are put in place to operate against the best interest of racialized students.

She was not even called upon to step down from her position because the structure is set up in such a way that she could carry on as she was elected into that role, and there are groups of parents who came forth to challenge that, who spent considerable amounts of time going through the process. They were told that's just the way that it works. It wasn't until that trustee decided that she was going to step down. I'm sure there were conversations that were had behind closed doors, but ultimately, it just reinforces the structural inequities and the ways in which you have safety, a discussion of safety on an individual level.

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I don't know that we can envision safety on an individual level without looking, structurally, at what's happening, where people who are in positions of power who

are not reflective of their communities and who, even when challenged in ways that they need to reconsider their practice, they choose not to. So, whose safety? What does safety look like? What are the ways in which the system reinforces these existing inequities? Those are the questions I think we need to ask.

[End of Kitchen Table Talk]

Kate: Hello, my name is Kate Curtis. I sat down with Gita Madan to talk with her about her research on the School Resource Officer program or SRO program which places full-time, uniformed and armed police officers inside Toronto public schools.

Gita is a high school teacher and community organizer in Toronto. In 2016, she completed her Master's thesis at the University of Toronto on Police Presence in TDSB schools.

Can you tell me about the work that you did during your Master's at OISE?

Gita: Yeah, I was in the Social Justice Education Department at OISE, and I did my MA thesis there. My thesis was looking at school disciplinary policy in Ontario and how it's changed and set the context for the introduction of police officers into schools, particularly in Toronto. I looked at this through a lens of race, in an effort to understand how this program came to be, in the first place, and what its impacts are and if there are disproportionate impacts on racialized students in our schools.

So, I did this through an institutional ethnographic approach where the story of the program hadn't really been pieced together and a lot of information about it hasn't been super publicly available since the program was implemented. I pieced together a lot of policy documents but also media reports and stories that have been told by affected students and parents and community members, to tell a story about the program itself, the SRO program, through a lens of race.

Kate: What is an SRO, and maybe you could talk about what kind of function that they serve in schools.

Gita: SRO stands for School Resource Officer. They're known as SROs in some school boards, but they have different names in different places. Yeah, in Toronto, they're called SROs in high schools. In elementary schools, they're called Community-School Liaison Officers. Essentially, they're armed and uniformed police officers that are permanently assigned to specific schools in the city.

At the beginning, they were permanently assigned. Now, in certain cases, certain officers are -- they're distributed to more than one school, and their function is to patrol the hallways of the schools, to build relationships with the students. They often serve a very -- they do a lot of activities that we wouldn't normally associate with policing, such as running clubs, speaking at assemblies, running program,

coaching at sports teams, all of those kinds of functions that you would expect a trained professional in Education to run.

They make active efforts to integrate themselves into the life of the school by befriending students, getting to know students that go to the school. There's quite a big effort to interact with students in a non-enforcement manner. They really want to show the other side of policing, the friendly face of policing that students, specially racialized students may not experience outside of the halls of the school. That's a real goal is to really try to build some of those relationships that they have been unsuccessful in building outside of the school.

Yeah, they do that through really trying to get to know the students on a first name basis and be really friendly with them. They often have incentives for participation in their various programs. They also, in some cases, really try to integrate with the school staff and management level, so, with school administration, and often will collaborate with school administration in the execution of disciplinary activities in the school.

Kate: Can you talk a little bit about -- you just said they started with 25 schools, and now it's right around 40. Where are the police officers? Because they're not in all schools. Did you find anything about how those decisions are being made?

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Gita: The way that the officers are distributed, the SROs are distributed across the city, it's a racialized spatial distribution, so they're mostly in southern schools through the Priority Area Framework that used to exist, which is now the Neighborhood Improvement Area Framework. These are the same neighborhoods that TAVIS, which is the street policing, community policing team that has been very highly criticized for its harsh approaches, for brutality, for racial profiling and carding in the streets; these are the same areas where community policing are being coursed through TAVIS. So now these same students who experience that kind of policing in their neighborhoods are being subjected to police presence in their schools as well. It is very much happening along race and class lines. Of course there are some schools that may be outliers, but there is definitely a pattern of race and class in terms of the spatial distribution of the program.

Kate: Gita brings up some important issues on how SROs are provided with funds to support extracurricular programs in schools under the Neighborhood Improvement Area Framework. I think it's important to point out that a Social Planning Toronto report released in January 2017 found that the TDSB has been diverting funds specifically allocated for schools in this neighborhoods.

These funds, called Learning Opportunity Grants, from the Ministry of Education, have instead been used to cover other general expenses in the board and are worth about \$61 million per year. This raises questions about how the SRO program is

pitched to schools when the most marginalized students are being denied access to the education funding that has been specifically allocated to them.

Can you talk about having police in schools, what kind of effects that has on the students in the school?

Gita:

Yes. There is an array of really important things to talk about here. Firstly, having police officers in schools, criminalizes students. In order to justify this program and the immense amount of resources that are going to put officers in schools, there must be a constructed threat in schools.

This program was implemented on the basis of safety. It was implemented because schools were deemed to be unsafe, and we need to do something in order to increase the levels of safety for all students in the school. Even when it was first implemented the first year, the grant, there was a provisional grant used to pay for the program, and that was a grant that was aimed directly at addressing gun violence in the city. So the whole justification for this program is safety.

So, when we talk about safety, we have to talk about who is the threat to safety in the school? What happens is that when you put officers in particular schools and targeting particular students, then those students are constructed as the threat to safety. That threat is mapped onto certain bodies, and it is racialized bodies. It is Black, Indigenous and other racialized bodies. Through the presence, not only of disciplinary activities, but even just the presence of police officers, these students are criminalized.

This has very material impacts in the sense that there's something called the school-to-prison pipeline which is a nexus, some people like to refer to it more as a nexus because it's not necessarily a linear path from schools to the prisons. There are many ways that students get pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system and into the prison system. Having police officers in the schools, and only in certain schools, means that discipline is being applied unevenly between schools.

There have been many stories, there are many stories told in the research, in the literature that talk about, and in the media as well, that talk about the same behavior in two different schools having vastly different consequences based on whether or not there was an SRO present in the school. So behaviors that otherwise would have been addressed through other disciplinary mechanisms such as, whatever schools use, suspensions, detentions, other consequences are now being dealt with by police officers and becoming matters that are pushed through the criminal justice system. This is a huge issue because that means many students are facing completely different consequences for the same behaviors.

I think it's also really important to contextualize programs such as the SRO program in the prison-industrial complex. In the context of prison expansions, there is a need on the part of the state to fill those prisons, so a program like the SRO program

gives officers, who are the people who do funnel young people into the criminal justice system, it gives officers unprecedented access to young people in the spaces of their school on a daily basis. It's no coincidence that the same students who are targeted by programs like this are also disproportionately represented in the prison system in Canada.

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We must see some of those parallels between incarceration and the application of these sorts of carceral practices in schooling. For example, the general societal crime rates have gone down while prisons have expanded. Similar things can be said about schools where schools are actually really quite safe places, but there is an expansion of strategies of securitization and surveillance within schools as well.

I think also, in terms of effects, it's important to note that it is the presence of officers that is very criminalizing. Even if the officers are doing more relationship-building type activities, the relationship-building approach has really been used as a way of defusing concerns about the program because it really does put a friendly face on the front of it, and it becomes much harder for people to criticize the program because it looks like they're actually doing just really positive and productive work in schools. We have to be able to see beyond that and to see what's actually happening in schools, so, yeah, even just the presence.

For example, there's a story that I like to tell about one school where the School Resource Officer insisted on parking his car at the very front of the school instead of parking it in his designated parking spot at the back of the school. That meant that people that were passing by would frequently stop and say, "What just happened at this school? Why is there a police officer here?" That was happening on a daily basis.

There is a big emphasis in the program on officers always being in uniform. This is even when they're conducting their relationship-building activities. So there really is a visual pedagogy to what's happening here as well, where students learn that they are the kinds of young people that need to be policed, that have been constructed as a threat, that have been constructed as criminals and therefore, police intervention, visible police intervention is always required in their spaces. So there are many levels of the effects.

Then there are also hidden effects that come with the relationship-building approach as well. For example, officers use this approach to get close to students and try to convince them that they're allies and that they can disclose sensitive information to them but then they collect this information and share it with other officers, with front line enforcement, with immigration enforcement, CBSA, Canada Border Services Agency.

The police themselves have said that School Resource Officers sit on teams of people who collect sensitive information about young people. So, there is a real intelligence-gathering mandate to this program as well. There is a sharing between officers that work in the schools and officers that -- TAVIS officers in the streets as well. That's something that students, they can be quite manipulated in that way, through a program like this.

This program also serves as a way of getting young people to change their perceptions about the police. What ends up happening, and other researches have documented this in the context of the Youth in Policing Initiative which is another initiative in the city that tries to bring young people together with the police to show a friendly face of policing.

What they found was that young people end up feeling very influenced often by the humanization of one particular officer and by the relationship that they're able to develop with that one person, and sometimes that view that they have of that officer can extend beyond that one particular person, into how they feel about the police as a whole. You end up having students who develop these relationships and then end up becoming sort of ambassadors sometimes or wanting to become police officers themselves.

There is this kind of separation of School Resource Officers as -- I think this is also related to the naming, is that the police force wants them to be seen as different, is different from what we would associate with traditional police activities outside of school. They want to be seen as a bridge between the rest of the police and young people, and students, and I think that they've actually been quite effective in accomplishing that, but it's very scary because there's all these other things happening underneath the surface.

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There have been many students that have reported that the police officers in their schools make them feel very unsafe, that make them feel scared within their school environments. There are students who acknowledge that maybe the SRO program comes with some benefits because the police are well-funded. As I was saying before, they do have incentives for some of their programs. So, there is another adult in the school that can be a coach if they don't have a coach and things like that. But many of these students that do recognize the benefits, also don't see why this has to be a police officer fulfilling those roles.

One of my students at one point was saying that his baseball team was playing against a baseball team of police officers, and he said, "Well, I don't want to shake their hands. These are the people that, they don't treat me well outside of the school. I don't want to play baseball with them. I don't want to shake their hands after the game, but if it's the only way that we can play baseball, then I guess I'll do it." So

there's this resignation because they see the good and the bad, but they still want the good.

Yeah, I definitely have a lot of students that I've talked to, and other people I've talked to as well, and a lot of stories that have come out about students feeling very, very unsafe in the school, which is really important to consider when we're thinking about safety. A police officer is a symbol of safety for some people, but it's a symbol of great danger for a lot of students too. So, when we're trying to make the school for everyone, who are we actually talking about? Whose safety are we actually concerned about?

Kate: Can you talk a little bit about effects on students specifically who are undocumented?

Gita: As you know, we have many undocumented students in Toronto, across Canada but especially in the urban centers, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver; and having police officers in schools makes school a very, very dangerous place for students. This is because, as I was talking about before, through the getting-to-know-you-approach, the relationship-building approach, there is a chance that officers could find out that a particular student might be undocumented.

Technically, a number of years ago, the Toronto District School Board committed to a Don't Ask Don't Tell policy. Basically the idea of the policy is that every person has the right to access schooling services regardless of their status, so students should never be asked about their status. If that information is disclosed to someone, a school authority, it's not supposed to be shared.

So, having police officers in the school poses a real danger because there are studies that show that in the context of Toronto, police officers very willingly and readily share information about status with Immigration Enforcement. This has happened in the context of raids outside of schools and so this really poses a great risk to students within the school, if they were to find out that information. So even though there is this commitment to don't ask, don't tell, in practice, it's not being implemented in a way that actually creates schools as a sanctuary for young people.

Kate: Can you talk a little bit more about how there are different discipline outcomes when something happens in the school when there's a police officer that's already there and readily available?

Gita: Before the introduction of the SRO program, police had to be called onto the school property by administration when there was an issue that they -- according to the Police School Board protocol, an issue that required police presence. When you have police just already there all the time, smaller issues that would have otherwise been dealt with through other disciplinary mechanisms within the school, like suspensions, detentions, however else administration currently deal with smaller

infraction of school rules, are now, in many cases, automatically referred to the police.

What the research has shown is that schools that do have SROs are responsible for much higher rates of in-school arrests. There is also a real subjective nature to this. What people found was that when police were put in schools, the rate of arrest for very subjective charges such as disorderly conduct, which is a catch-all charge, really shot up. Not only is it applied unevenly between one school that has an SRO and a school that does, but even within schools, police have a lot of discussion to choose how they want to exercise their power and on which students.

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Kate: Can we talk a little bit about, this has come up in the conversation, but do these officers actually make schools safer?

Gita: So, as I was saying before, the entire construct of safety, the narrative of safety very much depends on the construction of a threat in the school. It assumes that there is something always lingering in the school that requires intervention at all times, and very serious intervention, police intervention at all times. Here is where ideas about criminality are used or ideas of youths who are at risk and maybe the at-risk discourse. So, when we're talking about safety, I always ask the question, safe for who and safe from whom?

This program, the SRO program really draws that line according to race and according to class in schools. At the beginning, this program was really justified on the basis of safety concerns, but there's a couple of things. One is it's questionable whether we really have a real safety concern in schools. A lot of research shows that schools are actually some of the safest places in society. A lot of research shows that crime rates are going down, specifically, in-school crime rates have gone down across North America. So the first question is, is there really a safety threat in schools, or is this a threat that has been constructed?

I think that if this was a question of safety, well, the Falconer Report made 126 recommendations for how to improve school safety, not one of them was the SRO program.

Kate: Following the shooting death of 15-year-old Jordan Manners in 2007 at CW Jefferys Collegiate Institute in Toronto, the Falconer Report was commissioned by the TDSB to investigate safety in Toronto's schools. In early 2008, the panel released a report which included 126 recommendations to improve school safety. As Gita points out, not one of these recommendations called for the implementation of a police program within schools.

Gita: There are many other researchers and policy analysts who have recommendations that are based on evidence about how you can increase safety in schools, if that is

actually a concern, and generally, the research shows that SROs absolutely do not make schools safer. In fact they have negligible effects on students' feeling of safety in schools.

There have been two evaluations of the SRO program in Toronto. In one of them, they asked different stakeholders if their feelings of safety, how they've changed since the SRO programs was implemented. They asked students. Students said nothing's changed in terms of how safe they feel at school. They asked teachers, administrators. All of them said that their perceptions of safety have not changed. The only group of people who said that their perception of safety in the school has increased since the implementation of the SRO program is SROs themselves.

If we were using an evidence-based approach here, then we would be conducting solid evaluations. The two evaluations that have been done were done by the TPS, the Toronto Police Service themselves. In other words, there had been no independent, third party evaluation done of this program. So they do these evaluations. They come out with this data saying that perceptions of safety haven't changed, but somehow they still say that the program is a great success. They use that to justify the expansion of the program or to invest more money into it.

If you look at research, like I was saying before, of SRO programs and what they've done across the board in other places to change actual safety in schools, there really is no big difference. There are many other ways that researchers, educators, policymakers have shown to actually increase safety in schools.

First, I should say that the Falconer Report is not -- I don't advocate for all of their recommendations that were made in that report. For example, I would not support the use of drug-sniffing dogs in schools. However, there are a lot of constructive recommendations that were made by that report and other researchers in Toronto and beyond.

I think that one really important one is to reinstate support workers in schools, community support workers, guidance counselors. There are many positions that, under neoliberalism in the past however many years since the Harris days, have been cut, and I think that a lot of people have said that bringing back those positions and investing money into trained professionals in schools would be a very constructive way to address some of these issues, and of course complemented by other strategies.

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Kate: Thank you so much for the opportunity to interview you and talk to you about this issue.

Gita: Thank you so much for having me.

Jessamyn: We have an update. The interview you just heard was recorded in April of 2017, and a lot has happened since then. Thanks to the work of Education Not Incarceration and Black Lives Matter-Toronto, working in coalition with other activist organizations in the city, the SRO program has been temporarily suspended. So, this week, we asked Gita to come back and catch us up with what has happened and what is happening right now with the SRO program.

What was the lay of the land in April?

Gita: In April, the lay of the land was very similar to what it has been for years now, but there are a number of groups in the city who were preparing to organize or who were organizing and preparing to bring this issue to greater public attention again. That happened for the first time on May 1st. Black Lives Matter-Toronto organized a school walkout where a number of educators and students, parents and community members walked out, in protest of the anti-Black racism that exists in the school system here. They had a list of, I believe it was ten demands, it might have been 11, one of which was the removal of SROs from schools. There are a number of other demands as well. That was the first big action.

Since then there's been a number of organizations that have been working on this and also in coalition, so that includes Education Not Incarceration, as well as Black Lives Matter-Toronto, as well as LAEN or Latinx, Afro-Latin-America, Abya Yala Education Network, and a number of other organizations that have reached out and contributed, including SURJ [Showing Up for Racial Justice], JFAAP [Jane and Finch Action Against Poverty] – a lot of the different organizations in the city have been working on this since then, but what's really been happening is that in May, we decided to go to the Toronto Police Services board meeting because the SRO program was on the agenda there.

Normally, I guess what they would have done was just presented it as an agenda item and then passed it and moved on and accrue funding for it or whatever. They usually do. We organized a couple of deputations to happen there, and I think that really took the Police Services Board by surprise because they apparently haven't heard any of the concerns about the SRO program, despite the fact that there was initial community resistance at the beginning when it was first implemented.

At that meeting, they were actually very close to just suspending the program, right then and there, but they decided to defer the conversation until the June meeting. That basically gave everybody, ourselves but also the other side that is very pro-SRO, a lot of time to organize for the June meeting. The June meeting was full of people. There were many, many people outside the doors that couldn't get in. There were many police officers. Buses of students and teachers were bused down, largely from the Catholic District School Board to speak, and there were over 80 deputations made to this agenda item. It was a very polarizing moment. A lot of people were in favor, and a lot of people were against the program there.

I think it's also worth noting that most of the people that were in favor were speaking to the role of the SRO as another adult present in the school that can run programs and offer support or coaching or tutoring and things like that to students. Whereas, the side that was against was basically speaking to the fact that while that may happen for some students, that kind of narrative really obscures some of the other more punitive roles that the SRO takes in schools, and also the systemic role of the police, when you really contextualize what's happening in schools within the broader institution of policing, and the historical violence and ongoing violence at the hands of the police towards racialized, particularly Black and Indigenous youth. So there was a big contrast between the depth and just the justifications for and against the program in that meeting.

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We really pushed hard at the Police Services Board for a bit, but we realized pretty quickly that they're too deeply invested in the program to listen to any community concerns. So the Police Services Board decided to do a review of the program. They recruited Ryerson to run the review, but there has been very, very little transparency about how this review is going to be done, who's doing it, where the money is going. It's an \$80,000 budget for the review. Also the review is being led by the Chief of Police and the Chair of Police Services Board. So despite the fact that they're touting it as an independent review, it's really not.

At some point, we also shifted energy, or it was happening at the same time, but that we started really pushing on the school board side because this is a partnership program and both parties have the power to end this partnership. The TDSB in particular has really listened or has really tried to listen to a lot of the concerns that have been brought forward.

What they committed to doing, hearing these concerns, was the board decided to do a review of the program, and they decided to a review through a lens of equity. What they mean by this is that, whereas, traditionally, you might say, "Oh, 90% of students on the board, and teachers and parents support the program, therefore we're going to keep it going," what they want to do is center the voices of that other 10% that might not necessarily support the program but also would not be heard if they were just doing a majority sort of study.

So, that's what they've committed to doing, and over the past few weeks, they have held community consultations in a number of neighborhoods around the city to hear from youth voices, and parent, community, teacher voices. They've also done an in-school survey. At this point right now, we're waiting for the report from the TDSB.

The message from community was very, very clear at the consultations. It's the same message that we've been bringing forward for quite a while now, and it's the same message that was said at the very beginning when this program was

implemented. It's been very consistent from community, the message that we don't want police officers in schools. Now it's just a matter of how they present those findings in the report and how that report is taken up by the Board of Trustees, which is going to happen likely in November.

Jessamyn: You mentioned earlier, or it was on the news earlier that while they are doing the review process, they've also suspended the SRO program.

Gita: Yes. We really pushed for that as well. I think that the Trustees were really sad, but you can't necessarily go into a school space where there are police officers present when a big factor has been the fear and the intimidation that a lot of students have expressed about SROs and then ask students and teachers how they feel about the program.

We thought and a lot of people thought that that's not going to get you true answers from students because the police officers are right there in the school, and there's no safety created. There may, may not be repercussions for this and things like that. These are very serious issues. These are students that are targeted not only within school sometimes, but also outside of the school through racial profiling. There's a history of carding and things like that. A lot of these students have very negative experiences with police and with SROs in particular as well.

I think the push was to have the program suspended while this review could occur so that we could get the most authentic stories possible, or the TDSB could get the most authentic stories possible. So, yes, the program was temporarily suspended right before the school year started, and that was a decision made by the Toronto District School Board trustees and is suspended until the results of the review come out. They decide whether or not, based on those results, to continue the program or suspend it forever.

Jessamyn: In November, will it be the trustees who vote on the program, whether to suspend it indefinitely or not?

Gita: Yes, the trustees. The vote for the temporary suspension pending review was, I believe, 16 for and six against, in terms of where the trustees were at, at that time. They're also facing a lot of pressure from pro-SRO groups and individuals, so the pressure has to be maintained until this is actually, completely voted out.

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Jessamyn: Right now, if people are interested in helping maintain that pressure, are there specific places they should go to? Should they contact their trustees? Is there anything that you would recommend?

Gita: Yeah, I would say definitely contact your trustees and get people that you know to contact your trustees as well. You can also write public letters even if they're

anonymous so that the story is out there and people's concerns are as out there as possible. Also, if people are willing to write editorials or things in media or cover this story in other ways like this a podcast, then that's really great as well but, yeah, for now, especially pressure on the trustees and as much public dialogue about this as possible is really great leading up to the vote.

I would also just say that the Catholic District School Board is also another partner in this. They have had no engagement with this review process, and they have very vocally supported the program. I would just say for now that the TDSB review is a community consultation, so whatever the results are from that review are very applicable to the program as it exists in the TDSB as well. It will be interesting to see how they take up the decision that will be made by the TDSB.

Jessamyn: Here we want to take a break to mention a few things that have been on our mind throughout the process of making this podcast. We don't have answers. We invite you to think about these things with us. First, we are thinking about what it means that the surveillance of racialized youth is taking place on stolen Indigenous land. Second, we are weary of producing work that, in turn, produces surprise or pity. Our intention is to bring to light the everyday experiences that white supremacy and colonialism meticulously cover up. Third, we wonder about how we can listen to the stories of racialized youth with care, without intervening on their stories, for our own sake.

We offer these thoughts as hesitations, acknowledgements, concerns and further questions because as Michelle Forde said at the beginning of this episode, "There's a lot we can say, but there's a lot we cannot say."

Simone: Hello. My name is Simone Weir. I sat down and interviewed Tanya Aberman, the resource and project coordinator at the FCJ Refugee Center in Toronto. The FCJ Refugee Center has existed for 25 years. They give transitional housing to refugee women and children. They provide a diverse array of services to newcomers with specialties in newcomer youth. FCJ also has a health clinic for uninsured patients. They offer settlement services and immigration support services and try to fill in as many of the needs of newcomers as they can.

The FCJ authored a report, titled, "Uprooted Education Ontario Report 2016" which explored undocumented youths' intersection with access and involvement in Ontario high schools. I referenced this report during this interview. You will also hear quotes from the youth, pulled from the report, which speak to a particular topic being discussed. This report can be found online at fcjrefugeecenter.org.

So, in 2013, Toronto became a sanctuary city. Can you define what that means?

Tanya: It's a tough question. It's a very big question. Okay, so in 2013, Toronto decided, the Toronto City Council decided that all Toronto city services should be accessed without fear. They called the program, Access without Fear. Basically, regardless

of immigration status, all Toronto residents should have access to all Toronto services, in theory. In practice, it's a very different thing because of a lot of obstacles. We face a lot of challenges partially due to funding.

So, as much as a city service might be based in Toronto, if the funding is provincial or federal, there are requirements that need to be met, which often mean that people with precarious immigration status, meaning they are not permanent residents, cannot access. Then there is still, I would say, a lack of training in certain areas of the city where city staff who are supposed to be providing these services don't necessarily completely understand the nuances of people's situations and how to provide these services without necessarily requiring documentation of status or other things.

[0:50:30]

Simone: In Toronto, there is a Don't Ask Don't Tell policy associated with the sanctuary city. In your experience with FCJ youth, how has this impacted their school registration process?

Tanya: The Don't Ask Don't Tell policy actually predates the sanctuary city policy and was a policy that was fought for very hard by different groups in Toronto after, I believe, a family was detained because of the child's participation in the school. So, technically, in Toronto, the Toronto District School Board has this Don't Ask Don't Tell policy which is linked to the Education Act that says that any child under the age of 18, regardless of immigration status, should have access to primary and secondary education.

It is very misnamed in our perspective because it's not don't ask. Students are asked their immigration status repeatedly and asked to prove their immigration status repeatedly. They are allowed to attend school even without immigration status. The norm says children are allowed to go to school in Toronto so long as they can prove they are without status. There's a couple of reasons that that gets a little bit tricky sometimes for some families, but with that information, the TDSB has agreed that they will not share that information with Immigration for immigration purposes.

That said, children are sometimes asked or families are sometimes asked their status in front of other people. They are made to go to the registration center at 5050 Yonge where they have to say things in a window, in front of other people, which is a very intimidating experience for a lot of people. If they then are able to do all that and prove that they've been here for more than six months and they are officially without immigration status, then they're allowed to register for school. Or if they can show that they have some immigration status, then they can register for school. So, the don't ask part is pretty irrelevant to the system that actually is in place.

Simone: 5050 Yonge Street is the address where head office of the Toronto District School Board is located. It's located in the north central section of the City of Toronto and is easily accessible by different transit modes.

Okay, building on the last question, in terms of the registration process, do they always have to go to 5050 Yonge to register? Or is that possible for a student or family to register within a direct school, or are they always directed to 5050 Yonge, in your experience?

Tanya: Most of the time, they are directed to 5050 Yonge, particularly if the situation is a little bit more complicated and the schools don't necessarily know exactly how to register them. Several groups including No One Is Illegal, who have been doing work on this issue for a very long time, have been advocating for registration directly at the school so that no family would ever have to go to 5050 Yonge because that process is so difficult for so many families.

We had an agreement for a little while, but it's not really working or in practice anymore, where we could send an email which would allow them to receive the letter that you normally get at 5050 and bypass that situation because my colleague, Philip, has also been doing a lot of work with the school board, in terms of trying to increase access for youth. They are getting more strict again, and they are -- the system, it seems to be in a little bit ebbs and flows and so it would be ideal if people could go directly to schools, but they seem to tend to enforce that people have to go to 5050.

Simone: The TDSB, the Toronto District School Board, provides settlement workers in some schools and has new reception centers in some areas of the city. Have youth you worked with experienced feedback in terms of feeling safer by using these services?

[0:55:13]

Tanya: Youth have talked to us about particular SWIS workers, the settlement workers in schools, who they have really liked and who have made them feel very comfortable and very happy. We have at least two that we work with on a regular basis who really seem to understand the issues and understand where the youth are coming from and offer great support.

I've had, I guess it wasn't TDSB, but I've had alternative experiences where the settlement workers were a little bit aggressive in terms of wanting to help but wanting to get all the information they felt they needed in order to help, which really put families on the spot in terms of having to provide information, and they don't know why. They might get a little bit nervous by that. Because the more often you share your information, and with the more people, the more a family with precarious or no status may be at risk, so people tend to try and not share information more than they have to.

We know of students who go pretty much all the way through with almost nobody in their school knowing. Then there are other students who are different characters and do reach out for help in different ways and have been able to get great, great help and support and access to different things that is really quite amazing. So it's very much an individual experience, but from our experience, working with SWIS workers at least has been quite positive.

Simone: Okay, in your experience, how do undocumented youth cope with challenges such as being bullied or excluded from extracurricular activities based on their status?

Tanya: It's a real challenge, and it's a challenge that they bring to us quite often, that they are often excluded in different ways. Or even if it's not necessarily in regards to status, being a newcomer and a new student in a school can be very difficult in terms of making friends and becoming part of that community. That is a challenge that we see a lot.

Youth have also spoken to us a lot about challenges they face in terms of curriculum, in terms of tokenism in the classroom and being singled out as the student from a particular country or from a particular part of the world and therefore, representative of an entire nation or culture or background, and asked then to speak on that, which obviously they find very, very difficult especially if they're misplaced. A lot of students who may be from the Caribbean may be misidentified as being from Africa or from another part of the world, which they shared is very difficult for them because then they're put in this very awkward position that they should never have to be.

We also have a lot of students who want to go on field trips or want to join sports teams or do particular extracurricular or volunteer placements, which become impossible because they don't have an OHIP card or they don't have a SIM number or other things that are tied to status in different ways and therefore are left out from things that they would really like to be a part of.

Simone: I was reading in the Uprooted Education Report that same challenge in terms of the school requiring an OHIP card for field trips and so on and so forth. Do you think that's because of liability issues? Yeah, okay.

Tanya: I think so, if there's an accident on the trip or whatever.

Jessamyn: Page 15: I think the staff were really confused. Even now sometimes, when I talk to teachers or there's a field trip, they still don't recognize it is a thing. They're like, "Oh, you're supposed to have a health card. It's just supposed to be that way."

Simone: I was reading in the Uprooted Education Report, which the FCJ authored, that once an undocumented youth goes through the schooling system and reaches the end of the secondary level, that access to post-secondary can be limited due to the fact that

they would need to pay international student fees. In your experience, can you tell me a little bit more about that, based on the youths' perspective and what they have to go through?

[1:00:13]

Tanya: That is actually quite a devastating process for a lot of young people who, sometimes they don't even know what their immigration status is until they apply for post-secondary. Parents may not have shared all the details of the situation with them and then they apply with all their friends. They get a bill for international fees which then become impossible to pay.

Basically, anybody with less than permanent residence, whether that be a person without immigration status, whether that be a refugee claimant or somebody on any kind of long-term visa, is considered by immigration and by the school system, as a result, as an international student for post-secondary school, which means that they technically would need a study permit and to pay international fees which are three times, at least, what domestic fees are, and therefore become unmanageable without access to provincial loans or scholarships or anything else.

It becomes just an insurmountable barrier which, unfortunately, not everybody knows or understands, and so well-meaning teachers and guidance counselors and principals encourage youths often to apply to post-secondary. Apply now and we'll figure it out later kind of thing, which is very upsetting when the letter comes and there's nothing they can do about it. They've spent money to apply and spent money perhaps to even register and then realize that they won't be able to afford the rest of it.

This is a big, big barrier and very demoralizing. A lot of youth then end up having to either take up either precarious jobs or trying to find a way to fill their time which school used to do for them and improved them and allowed them to develop and grow and then they just feel -- we've often had people express to us how they feel stagnated or completely discouraged or isolated. It's a huge challenge that I think people are only just starting to really become aware of and try and figure out how to start to even address it.

Jessamyn: Page 35: I have four teachers and staff from the school that actually encouraged me to go to university and apply for university. Although they're great, I love them, they're great teachers, please stop! They didn't fully understand my situation, and even when I tried to explain it, they still didn't understand it.

Simone: What can guidance counselors, teachers and administrators do to better support safer spaces for undocumented youth, in your view and your experience?

Tanya: What's actually really interesting is the youth have a lot to say, and I would love for them to be able to express it to themselves, of what it is that they feel that they

need. We did a workshop day with teachers from the TDSB recently, and the youth were very eloquent in expressing what it was that they needed. I can try and capture a little bit of that, but I'm sure that I'm not going to, nearly, be able to express what they have expressed.

A lot of it was a question of checking in and making sure they're okay. Particularly in the leading years with the realization of the transition and everything else, with perhaps overwhelming to many, is offering support, not tokenizing the students, not isolating them from their peers, but at the same time, recognizing that their challenges might be different, and sometimes greater, sometimes maybe not, but that the support needed might be different.

Having a little bit of an awareness of the impact of status and immigration policy on youth is also an important aspect because so many people don't necessarily have that understanding. Genuinely advocating on their behalf, for access, whether it be access to high school and primary school even, more of that, more of easy access, more of the Don't Ask Don't Tell and more creating spaces where these students can feel safe and welcome and not asked to expose themselves and their families in particular ways. So, awareness, raising awareness among each other, advocacy coming from everywhere, yeah, I think that those could be steps forward for making the schools safer.

[1:05:41]

Simone: Undocumented youths face exclusion, accessibility and surveillance challenges on every level, ranging from their peers to the school board. On page 37 of the Uprooted Education Report, three suggested recommendations to improve youth experience include:

One, school boards, teachers and staff should use their educational networks and provincial ties to support existing efforts that are aimed at increasing access for precarious immigration status youth in post-secondary institutions.

Two, develop policies and practices that support precarious immigration status youth in moving forward positively after high school. This may include accessing community support and exploring alternatives to post-secondary education.

Three, further develop trainings to include access to post-secondary, extend the trainings around these issues to other relevant actors, including guidance counselors, college and university representatives, et cetera.

I want to thank you so much, Tanya, for taking time out of your day for speaking with me and, yeah, I don't know if you have any final words or...

Tanya: Thank you for your interest in the issue and for helping us to raise awareness about this important challenge that the refugee youths are facing.

Simone: Okay, great, thanks.

Eve: The Henceforward, Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

[1:09:23] End of Audio