

Trevor McAlmont- Black Experiences and Disabled Childhoods

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Trevor McAlmont: Thank you, Alison and great to be here. Great to hear Kevin and Sherron's comments and very important topic so, I'm happy to be contributing to it. I want to just read one quote from a Black disabled youth that I once worked with. He said, "Black young people with disabilities want to be seen as people first, not as Black and not as living with a disability." So, that's a great example of not only the Black experience, but also the experience of so many children and youth with exceptional needs. They're not always being seen, treated, or respected as individuals. So, if we ask ourselves, what does it mean to have a Black disabled identity, my first answer is always we need to ask someone who is Black and who has disabled identity. The voices of those with lived experience must be given more chances to express themselves about their own experience. So, I'm happy to see Kevin here participating. We need to bring forth the opportunities as Kevin talked about, bring forth more opportunity, meaningful engagement, and a lot of these discussions and (inaudible, 1:31). So, if we imagine for a moment and if we agree that a person with exceptional needs can include challenges related to physical communication, intellectual, emotional, social, behavioural, and then we would need to place on top of that the barriers associated with race. So, believing Blacks are lesser than other races, judging or profiling Blacks negatively based on race, treating Blacks unjustly based on race. Then essentially, you have lots and lots of children fighting racism and ableism all at the same time. This is not easy to do for children or for youth, but this is what we expect. When we talk about the experiences of Black children with disabilities, we need to discuss the systems of care that they are in. So, we have the education system, the mental health system, the early intervention childcare system, child welfare system, youth justice system, all of these systems, are what- are with the child is experiencing- some at the same time. Children and families are going through these systems, the youth are going through these systems with little to no support, recognition, resources. So, the systems of care and keeping those in mind and how children are navigating is very important. So, in my role as Director of Advocacy at the province one of the groups that we had a legislative mandate to provide advocacy for were Black youth in the systems of care. So, in 2016 we brought together over 130 Black youth from all across Ontario to voice their concerns on their experiences within child welfare, youth justice, education, and we published their stories in a report called (inaudible, 3:41) story. So, what we heard from Black youth with disabilities was 'Black youth with disabilities who are in the education system can easily fall through the cracks if they cannot communicate for themselves or have someone advocate for their rights.' I have a couple quotes from some of the youth so, one youth said, 'We sometimes find that because we are Black, our non-visible disabilities are neglected or ignored, and we are treated as problem children. We are punished for behaviour that is rooted in our disabilities when we should

be supported instead.” Another youth said, quote ‘We need to change the narrative of how individuals with physical challenges are viewed including by their own community. Having physical challenges is difficult enough. We don’t need others burdening us further with the label of being disabled.’ One more quote from a youth and he stated, “Professionals and systems of care, including the school system, assume that because we have a disability our other identities do not matter to us. It is assumed that we don’t share the same experiences of discrimination, racism, and bias as other Black youth do. So- and those are just a few quotes. We have stories and stories from the young people themselves. So, when we hear these stories and concerns from Black youth with disabilities, we have to think and go back six or seven years to when these were Black children with disabilities and reflect on what were the early intervention programs that they were in? Were those programs failing them? Were those programs helping them? We must look back and see what were the programs they were in? We know in general early intervention programs, or any programs for that matter, that address a child’s basic needs will help them. So, for instance having affordable childcare for families that need it. Having flexible hours of a program to accommodate working parents. Making healthy food available for children in programs, utilizing child-centred learning in programs. In general, these things help to empower and raise children up. Now, we would have to add on top of that a child dealing with race, culture, and disability. Then you would need programs that not only provide for their basic needs but also ensure a safe environment for them. One of the things that ensures safe environments are having proper policies and procedures in place so when that child comes into the program, there are structures there to keep them safe. For instance, is fostering the child’s identity a priority for that program? Are there any cultural or inclusive materials in that program? Are the spaces accessible and inclusive? Is there a process for reporting and tracking complaints? That’s a big one. That’s an important one. Is there a restorative process for any trauma that a child has experienced while in a program? That’s another big one. What are the professional development opportunities for the staff in that program? I mean, these are just a few examples of the notion of creating safe spaces for children- especially Black children, especially Black disabled children when they’re in these services and systems of care are there any structural pieces that are actually going to keep them safe? In my role now, I’m leading an organization providing early learning and childcare services- Macauley Child Development Centre. We are trying to be planful not reactive. We’re trying to be planful in how we design supports for Black children. We operate in the northwest part of Toronto, very marginalized, very diverse. So, we’re helping children- we’re helping a lot of children with exceptional needs. We’re trying to develop the structural supports that will ensure that the programs are of quality and based on healthy child development. I’m also a Co-chair of the City of Toronto working group focusing on anti-Black racism within the EarlyON child and family centres. There we are looking to incorporate the necessary processes and policies within these child and family centres. Again, to ensure children are having safe experiences. So, for instance, one of the things that we’re looking at is data. We look at programs that are supporting Black children and Black children with exceptional needs,

we have to ask what data is that program utilizing to provide supports? For instance, do we know where are the Black families in the city? In various regions? A lot of the programs are using the word black um, which is fine but in program planning and policy development it's not fine because you actually do not know where the families are from. What is the culture? Is it African? It is Caribbean? Black doesn't tell you that. What trickles down is that the child is not being supported properly. So, data can tell us who are the Black families? Where are they? What are the needs of those families? What are the needs of those children? So, its only by knowing this can we properly support the development of children. Overall, in hearing the experiences directly from Black Youth with disabilities, a large part of barriers and issues that they express comes from the systems of care that they're in. Um, so, it's my perspective that it's very important to incorporate specific structural supports within the environments the children are in. That is what's going to help ensure Black children with disabilities have positive experiences and healthy development. I'll stop there but I think- you know, in the discussion we'll come back to this notion of systems of care, discuss many of the others, school system- Sherron will have a lot to say about that, the child welfare system the youth justice system. Not a lot of people understand the disproportionate data right now here in Ontario for Black children and that data is even worse for Black children with disabilities. They're overrepresented in child welfare, overrepresented in youth justice, overrepresented in the negative outcomes in school and graduation. Aging out with no supports, especially with children with exceptional needs. So, we must be able to look at the data, utilize the data to support Black children but- I'll stop there, and we'll continue with the discussion. Thank you.