Hurdles to Higher Learning: Black Youth Voices on Challenges and Barriers to Postsecondary Education in Toronto
This research report was directed and driven by a dedicated team of youth, students, educators, advocates and youth outreach workers.

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Stolen From Africa / Volé D’Afrique (SFA) was selected by BYAP to lead this community-based research project. SFA is a national, non-profit arts education organization based in Toronto that promotes cultural and historical awareness of the African Diaspora.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESEARCH METHODS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Frameworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Breakdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUMMARY OF FINDINGS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Feelings About Education &amp; Postsecondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Academic Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Familial and Financial Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic Discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic profile of students who feel they have little or no chance of getting into post-secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RECOMMENDATIONS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Outreach Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSE Connectors Research &amp; Design Project Overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSE Student Survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The institution of education has a long standing history of creating barriers for racialized learners. As a result, communities, institutions and organizations have had to intentionally strategize on how to create meaningful spaces to challenge the status quo.

Howard University is a tier one historically Black university located in Washington, DC, USA. It ranks number two, after Spelman College, on the 2018 USNews & World Reports’ list of 80 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) across the US. Howard’s school of business is ranked number one by the Princeton Review as a “Greatest Resource for Minority Students” and Howard is also known to graduate and place some of the best Black lawyers in the US. Among its long list of esteemed alumni are Thurgood Marshall, the first Black justice appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court and Mary Ann Shadd, Canada’s first Black female newspaper publisher.

In a country with a long history of enslavement and exploitation of its Black citizens, HBCUs like Howard University provided African Americans with a high quality of education when mainstream school systems would not admit Black students into their schools. HBCUs have graduated some of America’s most known and respected historical figures, business professionals and politicians and continue to produce the best in American engineers, doctors and scientists.

Like the US, Black educators and school boards have invested in creating alternative spaces that are more representative and responsive to the Black diaspora in Canada. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB), after much consultation with community, opened an Africentric elementary school and two Africentric high school programs.

The Africentric Alternative School is the first formally recognized Africentric school in Canada. The school opened in 2009 and serves diverse TDSB students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8. Located inside the Sheppard Public School in North York, the school’s mission aims to “fulfil the TDSB’s education curriculum guidelines while ensuring students… gain valuable knowledge, respect and appreciation of Afrikan history, Afrika’s many cultures, customs and belief systems.”

3 Explore the Data Behind the Go-To Law Schools. (2015, February 23) Retrieved from https://www.law.com/nationallawjournal/almID/1202718545073/Explore-the-Data-Behind-the-Go-To-Law-Schools/ on March 10, 2018
4 Our History. Retrieved from http://law.howard.edu/content/our-history on March 14, 2018
The Leonard Braithwaite Program at Winston Churchill Collegiate in Scarborough and The Africentric Secondary Program located at Downsview Secondary School in North York offers high school students an opportunity to learn through an “africentric lens.” While they are only africentric programs, not schools, they provide grade 9 and grade 10 compulsory courses and alternative educational pathways that are de-streamed and focused on academic excellence (TDSB, Leonard Braithwaite Program).\(^7\)

While africentric schooling is not the answer or sole solution to anti-Black racism and academic achievement gaps in mainstream school boards across North America, it has emerged as an immediate response to the exclusion and disengagement Black students face and feel. Although they infuse culturally relevant and responsive materials and pedagogies, africentric schools and programs are open to all learners who can benefit from an inclusive learning environment, regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The TDSB is the largest school board in Canada and one of the most culturally diverse school boards in the world.\(^8\) However, despite a wide array of efforts to implement programs and policies to ensure equitable access to education for all of its students, according to TDSB statistics, Black and racialized students, on average, are not academically excelling at the same rates as non-racialized students.

The 2006 TDSB Student Census revealed alarming drop out rates for racialized students. For English-speaking Caribbean students, the drop out rate was 40%, for Aboriginal students 38%, for Central and South American students 37%, for East African students 32%, Southeast Asian students 29%, West Asian students 28%, West African students 26% and Canadian Black students 23\(^9\).

Latest 2011 TDSB Student Census data reveals Black and racialized students are still overrepresented in special education, have lower graduation rates and have higher suspension rates, as outlined in a TDSB report “Improving Black Student Achievement: Secondary Plan (Update) June 2015.”

Although they comprise only 12\% of the student population…Black students in the TDSB:

- Represent disproportionally high percentages of students identified with non-gifted exceptionalities in Special Education;

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\(^7\) Toronto District School Board. “Africentric Secondary Programs.” Retrieved from http://www.tdsb.on.ca/About-Us/Innovation/High-School-Specialized-Programs/Africentric-Secondary-Programs on March 15, 2018


• Have a lower achievement rate in Grade 9 Credit Accumulation (with 29% of Black students earning less than 8 credits in 2011-12);

• Show lower graduation rates based on the Grade 9 Cohort Study 2006-11 (64.5% rate for Black students vs. 78.6% for all students);

• Drop out of school at high rates (22.8% for Black students versus 14.1% for all students);

• Show higher rates of suspension (with 43.7% of Black students having had at least one suspension vs. all students at 20.5%) and

• Are over-represented in Applied and Locally Developed courses (22.7% and 29.3% respectively).

Similar to the Black experience in the United States, Black communities in Canada have experienced a long history of social exclusion and discrimination within public education.

When Blacks first began to settle in Ontario as Black Loyalists and as ex-slaves who freed themselves through the Underground Railroad, there was no red carpet for them to academically succeed in local school systems. Instead, they were met with anti-black racism and segregated schools.

Segregation in schools was legal in two provinces in Canada: Nova Scotia and Ontario. After white parents lobbied the province to legitimize their current practice of denying Black students into their schools, amendments were made to The Common School Act of 1850 which made it legal for separate schools to be created based on religion and race.

Section XIX of the Act read:

And be it enacted, That it shall be the duty of the Municipal Council of any Township, and the Board of School Trustees of any City, Town or incorporated Villages, on the application in writing of twelve or more resident heads of families, to authorize the establishment of one or more separate schools for Protestants, Roman Catholics, or coloured people.

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Black communities in Ontario setup schools for themselves, not because they wanted separate schools but because white communities did not want Black children in their classrooms. Some Black schools thrived, like the Buxton Mission School in North Buxton, ON, so successful that the local white school was shutdown and its students transferred to the Buxton school. However, most Black schools did not do as well as their local white schools because resources were not equally distributed or allocated and Black educators weren’t adequately or formally trained.

In 1964, Leonard Braithwaite, Ontario’s first Black MPP, was influential in getting the clause that made separate schools based on race legal repealed after his first speech to the Ontario legislature calling the 114 year old clause outdated. However, while segregation in schools is no longer legal, 50 years later, mainstream education has not closed academic achievement gaps for Black students.

Despite all the reports, recommendations and rallying from youth, parents, educators and community organizations, the pervasiveness of anti-black racism and social inequity continue to present massive barriers to Black youth’s academic success in mainstream education.

Everyday, Black youth walk into schools across Canada and experience a lived reality like no other group. Two sets of curricula serve to create “hegemonic schooling policies, programs, and practices that perpetuate stereotyping that are oppressive to racialized students”. The first set, curriculum of math, science, history, etcetera, is taught through explicit mediums of schooling. The second set are insinuated through more implicit routines; the hidden curriculum regarding “universal” ways of walking, talking, dressing, and behaving are insidiously interwoven within the school system through modes of teaching, learning and the spatial realities of the public school. All pupils are taught these ways through a K-12 education. This process fosters socially sanctioned values, norms and patterns of behaviour that people are expected to have in order to succeed in post secondary education and society in general. Because the second set is arguably more impactful, it is understandable that the many students who do not “live up” to these standards become disengaged with the primary set of curriculum and subsequently become disenchanted with school, and education in general.

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The multiple reasons why Black youth hold one of the highest ‘push out’ rates amongst any racially-based demographic (TDSB Census, 2011) make it essential to explore the processes through which Black youth experience their schooling identities.

In March 2017, the provincial government introduced the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan (BYAP) and a commitment to increase positive outcomes for Black communities across the GTA, Hamilton, Windsor and Ottawa.

In December 2017, Stolen From Africa / Volé D’Afrique was selected and funded through BYAP to lead a community-based research project to create Ontario-specific evidence to support the design and implementation of the Postsecondary Education Connectors (PSEC) Initiatives.

Postsecondary Education Connectors (PSECs) will be placed in community-based organizations as “mentors”, “navigators” and “coaches” who will develop personal relationships with Black youth, spark their interests in attending college or university and connect them to resources and programs to help ensure they get there.

This research project focuses on modern-day barriers and challenges to postsecondary education as identified by Black youth in Toronto, enrolled in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), Toronto Catholic District School Board (TDCSB), Black youth enrolled in private school systems and Black youth not enrolled in formal education.
RESEARCH METHODS

Theoretical Frameworks

When studying the barriers and challenges that hinder Black youth’s access to post-secondary education, this project used a combination of phenomenological and critical theories. Due to the central themes presented in this project, understanding the phenomenon of Black youth experiences in educational spaces leads to a critical pillar of phenomenology, as it “begins its analysis of intuitions of presences not in their objective sense, but precisely in terms of the full range of ‘givenness,’ no matter how partial or marginal, that are present, and in terms of the meaning that the phenomena have for experiencing subjects.” Ultimately, the phenomenological approach “clarifies the nature of our everyday experience of objects and the world, and thereby clarifies both (1) the nature of those objects and that world precisely as objects of experience and (2) the nature of ourselves and of other subjects in and of the world.”

Critical Anti-Racism Theory (CART) is a theoretical framework that can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact systems and social structures, such as schooling. This theory asserts that, “we cannot understand race without being anti-racist.” Although CART acknowledges that race is a set of social constructions, it also realizes that “it is racism that has made race real.” CART is integral to this project because of the historical nature of its origins, claiming that race and racism is a system, deriving from a colonial projection of order. This is no more pressing and explicit than in education, and especially in the schooling of Black youth in Toronto. CART posits, “oppressions have many things in common – for example, oppressions work within structures, they are intended to establish material advantage and disadvantage, and they make invidious distinctions of self/Other.”

By using these theoretical frameworks, we seek to include analysis that produces counter-stories to balance the hegemonic, often white, representations of the experiences of Black youth in education.

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Moreover, centering this research in race and racial oppression theory should not be seen as an attempt to hierarchize and/or privilege one form of social oppression over another.

To put the complexities of CART more succinctly, “the danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place”25. Thus, the centrality of this framework lies in the analysis of experiential knowledge, as CART “recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of colour as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination”26. Drawing specifically on the lived experiences of Black youth fosters a sense of ownership and accuracy in analysis.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that, “the use of the race concept as an analytical and practical tool is only valid if it allows for adequate discussion and the transformation of relations of power, domination and oppression”27. Because CART amplifies voices from the margins, this research project is another attempt to move from intellectual observations to practical agency. The key goal of this community-based research project was to “create Ontario-specific evidence” to support the design and implementation of the Postsecondary Education Connectors (PSEC) Initiative under the BYAP and to inform and strengthen processes and practices by government, community and education systems to better support Black youth and their academic success in mainstream education systems.

In accordance with community-based principles, our research process centred Black youth voices as experts on the issues impacting their lives and their communities. Our research committee included two Black youth/students, a Black Provincial Youth Outreach Worker, a Student Equity Advisory/Advocate, the President of the Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators, a Black Community-Based Researcher and a Black Community-Based Arts Educator.

We believe that in order to produce the most relevant and authentic research evidence possible, our committee had to be representative and reflective of the research community. It was our hope that by having a research committee that is reflective of the demographic community, this project would foster a sense of self-determination and authenticity to the research process. It also ensured that the design and delivery of the research was collaborative, representative and culturally responsive and appropriate.

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Research Population

Survey and focus group data was collected using a snowball sample technique of 169 Black youth and students, aged 16 - 25 enrolled and not enrolled in formal education (Figure 1). Fifty-four percent (54%) of youth surveyed identified as female and 46% identified as male. None of the youth surveyed identified as non-binary, third gender or preferred to self-describe (Figure 2).

![Figure 1: Age](image1.png)

Outreach was geared towards Black youth and students from all six boroughs in the Greater Toronto Area, specifically from the following communities: Rexdale, Jane-Finch, Weston-Mt.Dennis, Regent Park, The Esplanade, Flemingdon Park, Victoria Village, Eglinton East, Steeles-L’Amoreaux, Bay Mills, Glendower, Chester Le, Malvern, Scarborough Village, Kennedy Park, Crescent Town, Kingston-Galloway, and West Hill (Figure 3).

![Figure 3: I currently live in](image2.png)
Data was intentionally focused and collected from youth from the above mentioned communities and students attending schools with the lowest graduation rates across Toronto. These schools were identified through reviewing the TDSB 2017 Learning Opportunities Index and by ensuring representation from the City of Toronto’s Neighbourhood Improvement Areas.

Black youth and students were also referred to participate in this research project by school staff, social service workers, youth justice workers and youth program staff. Voices from youth in care, youth involved in the justice system, street-involved youth and youth with multiple suspensions were prioritized.

The majority of Black youth surveyed (66%) were students in the Toronto District School Board, followed by 21% in the Toronto Catholic District School Board. Nine percent (9%) indicated they were not in school and 4% indicated “other”, reporting they were in private school, attending a school outside of the TDSB and TDCSB districts or were enrolled in postsecondary school courses.
Black youth and students from diverse cultural communities participated in this research project and identified with one or more of the following cultural backgrounds: Caribbean, West African, East African, South African, African Canadian and Afro-Latinx (Figure 5).

The majority of Black youth surveyed completed grade 12 (38%) or grade 11 (26%) and were taking academic (47%) or applied level courses (31%) (Figures 6 & 7).
Outreach

An email outlining survey objectives was forwarded directly to school board educators, youth workers and staff that work in the justice sector and staff from transitional year education and bridging programs at postsecondary institutions across Toronto. The email requested assistance in setting up focus groups and interviews with Black youth they work with and invited program staff leads to participate in research interviews. Some youth workers and program staff forwarded our email amongst their networks encouraging other organizational partners to participate. The research committee also utilized word of mouth and social media to recruit potential youth participants.

The most successful outreach method was to leverage existing relationships our committee already had with Black youth across the GTA. Committee members physically went to schools in the prioritized neighbourhoods and research communities and connected with marginalized Black youth in person and invited them to complete the online survey and/or participate in a focus group. Research participants were also encouraged to invite their peers to participate as well.

All survey participants received a $10 gift card upon completion of the survey. Focus group participants received a $10 gift card, a meal with refreshments and TTC tokens for travel reimbursement.

Data Collection

Surveys and focus groups were completed at 22 schools across all four quadrants of the city of Toronto (North, South, East and West) and at five non-profit organizational groups and after school programs.

One hundred and sixty-nine (169) youth/student surveys were completed online by cellphone or laptop outlining their perspectives on access to and preparation for postsecondary. Five focus groups were conducted with a total of 55 Black youth participants. In addition, ten interviews were completed with educators, youth workers and with staff from transitional year education and bridging programs at postsecondary institutions across Toronto who shared qualitative experiences on the barriers Black youth face in accessing postsecondary opportunities.

Surveys, on average, took anywhere from five to 15 minutes for youth and students to complete and focus groups went from 30 minutes to two hours long. Through focus groups and surveys, a conglomeration of quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed using a mixed-coding approach.
All focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. An inductive approach was utilized to analyze the data, allowing for major themes to emerge from the data upon analysis, as opposed to approaching data analysis with preconceived themes.28 Furthermore, the research project used critical narrative analysis in order to examine the counter narratives that Black youth produced as forms of resistance and transformation. Narratives within interviews are especially powerful sites for the construction of identity and the representation of social relationships.29

**Survey Breakdown**

The youth survey was comprised of 20 questions that asked students about their general feelings about post-secondary school, how supported they felt in applying to postsecondary school and asked them to identify specific barriers that would make it difficult for them to apply to and attend postsecondary school.

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Findings reveal that while most Black youth surveyed have aspirations of going to college or university, many indicated social, academic and financial barriers to postsecondary education and felt their academic success was not a priority among school board educators and administrators.

Specifically, three main themes arose from the data: 1) Lack of academic support, 2) Insufficient financial and familial resources, and 3) Systemic discrimination.

**General Feelings About Education & Postsecondary School**

On average, youth surveyed indicated 8, on a scale of 0 to 10, that they believed going to college or university would be beneficial to their futures (Figure 8).

All survey respondents indicated they intended on applying to either university, college or both (Figure 9).

![Figure 8: I believe going to college or university will be beneficial to my future](image)

![Figure 9 - I intend on:](image)
Lack of Academic Support

Even though focus group participants shared their intentions on applying to postsecondary school or felt an obligation to do so from peers or by caring adults in their lives, participants also shared that the lack of academic support and guidance in educational spaces is what ultimately plays a big factor in influencing their negative feelings towards school and higher learning.

While most youth surveyed indicated they believed going to college or university would be beneficial to their futures, youth indicated a 5, on a scale of 0 to 10, on how informed they felt on how the courses they chose in grade 9 would impact their ability to apply to university or college (Figure 10).

Furthermore, youth participants indicated a 6 on how strong of an overall understanding they possess on how to apply to post-secondary school (Figure 11).

Consider the following excerpt from a youth participant:

“It’s very unclear how postsecondary is supposed to further your career. It’s just everyone telling you have to do it. It’s compulsory. Then you’re met with all these obstacles… application fee… No one really breaking it down for you, like… How are you supposed to plan courses? What’s the best way to seek out a guidance counsellor if you need help? There’s a lack of understanding of why you need to do it in the first place.” (Personal communication, February 23, 2018)
Students shared confusion around whether postsecondary school would actually benefit their futures, even though they intended on applying to college or university:

“I’m kinda confused of if I really am going into post-secondary school cause there’s so many that have dropped out and also I don’t know if it’s really gonna benefit my future.” (Personal communication, February 20, 2018)

There was also a fear that when they did graduate from a postsecondary institution, there would be no jobs for them:

“I’m scared that when I graduate from college or university there are not gonna be any jobs for me… They’ll take them (other ethnocultural groups), before they take us.” (Personal communication, February 28, 2018)

When asked, “How supported do you feel by your assigned guidance counsellor,” youth participants indicated a 5 (Figure 12).

![Figure 12: How supported I feel by my assigned guidance counsellor](image)

Consider the following excerpt by a youth participant:

“A lot of the guidance counsellors don’t take time to consider your schedule. They just give everything to you to fill up your school schedule without thinking about how it will effect us. I have an after school job… I have responsibilities outside of here.” (Personal communication, February 12, 2018)

Upon further examination of all 169 survey responses on how supported they felt by their assigned guidance counsellor, on average, 50% of students indicated an 8, on a scale from 0 to 10, 34% indicated a 3 and %6 indicated a 5, meaning only half of students surveyed felt supported by their guidance counsellors while the other half of the students felt somewhat supported or not supported at all (Figure 13).
The following narratives, shared by both youth participants and youth workers, echo this sentiment:

“Most of us are in grade 12 now and it’s only now that they’re talking to us in terms of postsecondary. And most of us are struggling on what to do and they didn’t really give us any advice until last minute.” (Personal communication, February 14, 2018)

“They don’t offer a lot of guidance when it comes to your marks and how to improve. They just tell you your junior and senior year marks matter the most.” (Personal communication, February 28, 2018)

“Teachers and staff have a lower expectation (of Black youth), they’re not being groomed or given the necessary information to get on that path.” (Transitional Year Programme Worker, January 31, 2018)

“They share conversations they’ve had with other adults in the building, positive and negative… The guidance counsellor telling one of our students that they don’t have what it takes to go to university based on their grades. They’re (students) not given the push and they’re not told they have to push themselves… They have a defeatist mentality. They’re the first in their generation. There’s no fall back on adults to share experiences.” (After-school Youth Worker, February 9, 2018)
“Because I’m behind with school and my credits, I’m not encouraged to go to school. If you need certain accommodations, I’ve heard from teachers that, ‘You’re not gonna get in this university, look at apprenticeships,’ or ‘Look at a certificate instead of a degree.’” (Personal communication, February 28, 2018).

“At the elementary level there’s a channeling of Black youth into streams. At elementary they’re not being taught the foundations and end up with gaps in their understanding. The problem compounds when they get to secondary school.” (Youth Justice Worker, January 22, 2018)

These narratives speak to the saliency in providing support and resources that assist marginalized youth. For instance, youth that answered “yes” on attending a program that supports their education and encourages them to go to postsecondary school indicated an 8, on a scale of 0 to 10, on how strong of an understanding they possess on applying to postsecondary school (Figure 14).

In contrast, youth that indicated “no” on attending a program that supports their education and encourages them to go to postsecondary school indicated a 5 on their strength of an understanding (Figure 15).
Lack of Familial and Financial Resources

When asked who they felt comfortable talking to about postsecondary school, 58% of youth surveyed indicated “my parent(s) or guardian,” followed by “my friends,” 49%, and “my guidance counsellor,” 47% (Figure 16).

While research participants said they would feel most comfortable speaking with parents/guardians or friends, educators and youth program staff explain parents are not necessarily equipped with the knowledge and understanding of how to best prepare their children for postsecondary school and educational pathways:

“They (Black youth) have shared that sometimes their parents don’t necessarily understand their dreams of going to postsecondary school. Parents don’t understand the route to get there or place value on it. They’re confused on how postsecondary education works. Streaming tracks are not well explained. Parents are confused or have had no interactions with staff.” (Youth After School Program Worker, February 9, 2018)
“It’s personal mindsets. Students trying to navigate their way through an education system that is colonizing and destructive. Students aren’t given the voice and the language… Support from family… They don’t understand the importance of students leaving the neighbourhood to go downtown. When it comes to professional and familial support, students are isolated.” (Transitional Year Programme Worker, January 31, 2018)

Financial Barriers

When asked what specifically makes it difficult to apply to postsecondary school, youth survey respondents indicated “my marks,” (59%), “the application fee,” (43%), and “postsecondary school is too expensive,” (38%) as their top three barriers. Aside from these top three barriers identified, the following were also indicated: “no one there to explain how things work,” (27%), “I do not like school,” (25%), and “I don’t know if they will accept my IEP (Individualized Education Plan),” (15%) (Figure 17).
Research participants explained that by eliminating the application fee for Black youth and families that can’t afford it, postsecondary education would be much more accessible:

“The cost, I’m pretty sure if it was free there would be more people motivated to go to college. There’s loop holes in everything. They’ll give you money, but what about the application fee? This is why I didn’t apply. I feel like students that have low income...their lives are jeopardized. They work and their grades suffer.” (Youth worker, February 28, 2018)

Support with child care, transportation and transitional support between financial support systems is also needed:

“Financial barriers, meeting eligibility criteria, supports to be successful, the ability to find transportation to get to school… Sole support parents don’t have income to facilitate access, social barriers, systemic barriers, criminalization, lack of adequate representation in institutions, processes in the systems that create systemic bias against youth. OW to OSAP transition is not the smoothest thing. That interval sometimes puts people below poverty line. There’s an inter-disconnectedness from systems.” (Transitional Year Programme Worker, February 9, 2018)

Systemic Discrimination

Many scholars have abundantly documented Black youth and their experiences with the educational system over the last several decades30. Research on systemic discrimination within educational spaces abounds as well. Many educators may have good individual intentions. Unfortunately, that cannot negate the consequences that Black youth suffer due to systemic impact. Dealing with the psychological and sociological effects of structural discrimination hinders opportunities to learn.

Research participants shared how blatant experiences of systemic racism and criminalization deter them from aspirations of staying in school or pursuing higher education:

“Students are being systemically oppressed. A grade 9 student gets jumped, his friends retaliate, teacher intervenes and both sides get suspended. The police are called and the young person that got

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beat up catches a charge cause he assaulted the teacher who tried to break up the fight. Power dynamic… In our schools, some lives are more important than others. The hierarchy is detrimental to student safety. Students need safe schools transfers to go to a safer school. On a simple suspension, some students can’t just go to another school… If you get kicked out of your home school, you can’t just go anywhere because of turf issues. “ (Youth Justice Worker, January 22, 2018)

“I walked through the hall with a mask on and got suspended for three days, but if a white kid does it, they don’t get suspended. Nothing happened, but the Black kid got suspended. The different minority groups get more pull, compared to the amount of Black people. It’s a big change.” (Personal communication, February 14, 2018)

“Staff is not representative of students, so they don’t feel like school is a safe space because they don’t see themselves. Teachers misunderstand what they do and criminalize them.” (Youth Justice Worker, January 22, 2018)

“Just getting into the school is a barrier. They gate keep a lot.. and unless you have formally recognized relationships with the schools, it’s hard for community groups to support students and they [schools] don’t support the processes or make it easier. I challenged a teacher that was specifically blocking students from class and wouldn’t give them their work. [They] were targeted because they were Black and back from a suspension.” (Youth Justice Worker, January 22, 2018)

Youth outreach workers and educators shared how both racism and poverty make it more difficult for Black youth to access postsecondary school:

“Poverty is racialized. Historically, people of colour are excluded and lack community connections. How do you obtain scholarships and grants? It’s harder to access when your people carry the legacy of how we came here.” (Transitional Year Programme Worker, February 9, 2018)

“There’s a lack of information, damage done by high schools and purposeful streaming and lack of visibility… Being told there’s a lack of belief in you by teachers that have low expectations. Lack of Black educators asking, ‘Hey, where do you want to go?’” (Transitional Year Programme Worker, January 31, 2018)
“Schools and students are systematically under resourced. One social worker for 3-5 schools. If you want to fix something, invest in more social supports.. into programs, into materials, into technology, into accessible educational supports.” (Youth Outreach Worker, February 20, 2018)

Demographic profile of students who feel they have little or no chance of getting into post-secondary school

Twelve percent (12%) of youth surveyed indicated they felt they had little or no chance (4 or less, out of 10) of getting into post-secondary school. Over seventy percent of these youth identified as male. When asked what makes it difficult to apply to post-secondary schools, they listed “my marks” and “I don’t like school” as their top two choices (Figure 19), as opposed to the “the application fee” and “my marks” indicated by survey participants overall (Figure 17).

Black-male identified students and youth represented 76% of students who feel they have little or no chance of getting into post-secondary school (Figure 18).

Culturally, the majority of students in this demographic identified as Caribbean (47%) and African Canadian (38%) (Figure 19).
Similar to sentiments from the overall research group, Black male youth described a dislike for “school, not learning,” and an overall sense of disengagement.

Participants shared:

“It’s shit (school), it’s horrible (school environment), a lot of the teachers don’t teach you based on how you tell them you learn or would prefer to learn.” (Personal communication, February 12, 2018)

“They feel like they are walking into unfamiliar territories. They feel like it’s (postsecondary school) not for them or they’ve have negative situations through school, being streamlined into unsustainable paths or told by guidance that postsecondary may not be for them. Now they have negative connotations and experiences.” (Transitional Year Programme Worker, January 31, 2018)
When asked if they intended on applying to postsecondary school, respondents in this demographic, 48%, indicated they would apply to college or university, 24% were “Unsure,” and 19% said they were “Going Straight to Work.” (Figure 21)

![Figure 21: I intend on:](image)

When asked on a scale from 0 to 10 on how informed they felt on how the courses they chose in grade 9 would impact their ability to apply to university or college, youth from this demographic surveyed 3 out of 10 (Figure 22), compared to all survey respondents that indicated 5 (Figure 10).

![Figure 22: How informed I felt on how the courses I chose in grade 9 would impact my ability to apply to university or college](image)

When asked on a scale from 0 to 10 on how supported they felt from their assigned guidance counsellor, youth from this demographic surveyed 3 out of 10 (Figure 23), compared to all survey respondents that indicated 5 (Figure 12).

![Figure 23: How supported I felt from my assigned guidance counsellor](image)
When asked on a scale from 0 to 10, on how strong of an understanding they have on how to apply to postsecondary school, youth surveyed from this demographic indicated 3 on a scale of 0 to 10 (Figure 24), in comparison to all survey respondents that indicated 6 (Figure 11).

Consider the following excerpts from youth and youth workers:

“Teachers don’t care enough to teach us properly… I still don’t understand math.” (Personal communication, February 12, 2018)

“Most of these teachers have no idea of what these young people are going through and instead of helping them they add to the cycle of abuse the youth are experiencing.” (Youth Justice Worker, January 22, 2018)

“Youth are told they are worthless, so they accept it and don’t aspire to go to school. Everyday survival… Teachers don’t realize how much they are contributing to problems youth face in classrooms and pride is getting in the way of asking questions that could support students.” (Youth Justice Worker, January 22, 2018)
When asked what specifically makes it difficult to apply to postsecondary school, survey respondents from this demographic indicated “my marks,” 52%, “I don’t like school,” 52%, and “no one to explain how things work,” 38%, as their top three barriers. Aside from these top three barriers, the following were also identified: “I don’t know if they will accept my IEP,” 29%, “the application fee,” 29%, and “I do not like the way I’m treated by staff at my school,” 19% (Figure 25).

The participants in this demographic shared the multitude and complexity of financial barriers and discrimination they face with a young offender record:

“Run ins with the law effects you a lot... like with your financial and social life. People look at you different when you have charges. Certain people look at you different. They say they cannot use my YO (Young Offender) record against me, but they can still see it... The look you get. You’re limited and can only do things like construction when they go into your background.” (Personal Communication, February 28, 2018)
When asked if they were aware of any programs in their school or community that can assist them with applying to post-secondary school, 23% of youth from this demographic indicated "yes", 39 indicated "no" and 38% indicated "not sure" in contrast to all survey respondents that indicated "yes", (50%), "no" (28%), and "not sure" (22%) (Figure 26).

When asked if they attended a program that supports their education and encourages them to go to post secondary school, 71% of youth surveyed from this demographic indicated "no" and 29% indicated "yes" in contrast to all survey respondents that indicated "yes", (49%) and "no" (51%) (Figure 27).
CONCLUSION

The three themes that arouse in this project speak to fundamental issues that cannot be ignored. Lack of support, financial challenges, and systemic barriers reflect what is happening in society today. Systemic ‘othering’ in educational spaces inevitably has psychological and sociological effects on learning, inclusion, and creativity. All of the participants shared the detrimental effects of ‘not belonging’ and of being ignored and pathologized into certain categories. In order to effectively dismantle the effects of systemic barriers, we must reflect and learn about the epistemological consequences of accepting certain bodies over others.

The Canadian educational system produces, polices, and standardizes epistemologies that affect marginalized groups such as Black youth\(^{31}\). This speaks to the power of hegemony in Canadian education to negate and deprive Black youth by privileging narratives that undermine, obscure and outright ignore their struggles against entrenched systems of domination. Furthermore, Eurocentric hegemony in Canadian education is achieved despite, and perhaps through, publicly stated assurances that seek to portray equality for all. Insidiously, these public commitments to inclusion and equality allow Canadians to rest assured that Canada is a just society without feeling compelled to explore how and if these commitments are met.

For example, in 1993, the Ontario Ministry of Education produced a document intended to guide the development and implementation of anti-racism in schools. This document titled “Antiracism and Ethno-Cultural Equity in School Boards” states:

> Antiracist curriculum enables all students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and provides each student with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed to live in a complex and diverse world. It challenges the Eurocentric nature of curriculum and of the society in which young people are growing up. Curriculum development and selection is made on the basis of what a student requires to function effectively in a culturally and racially diverse society.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{32}\)Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 13-14
When comparing these public commitments to the narratives of youth in this study, it seems that there exists a disparity between the theory and the practice of the curriculum and policy. This disparity has real effects on the lives of not only Black youth but all participants in education. At the same time, there is always hope because the educational system can become reinvented by students, educators, and the community. The possibility of change must be the driving force of everyone who wants to see Black and racialized youth overcome personal and systemic barriers and challenges to postsecondary education.

If the goal is to increase pathways and educational supports for Black youth to go to college or university, we must amplify marginalized youth voices and implement the strategies they outline and the strategies identified by adults who care for them. As we seek to re-envision education, policy makers must consider ways that promote positive learning experiences that can be created through a wide array of empirical subjectivity, including the experience of underrepresented youth, in addition to statistical facts. Systemic barriers force many Black and racialized youth into thinking that there must be some either-or decision made in high school.

The important takeaway here is that marginalized youth can indeed exercise agency within the set of conditions in which they find themselves. Hegemonic institutions like schooling must foster the moral imagination of underrepresented youth so that they have imaginative potential to, while rooted in reality, see beyond reality and discern diverse possibilities.

Educators must be equipped to understand Black youth on their own terms—understand the spaces in which they live, create, and work. Genuinely learning about the cultures or spaces that offer them a sense of worth, validation, and belonging can no longer be optional.

Needless to say, additional research is needed to document the barriers that Black students identify, experience, and negotiate within postsecondary institutions. How does lack of support and cultural capital in postsecondary institutions mirror and differ from the obstacles discussed in this research project?
RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were provided directly from youth, youth workers and educators during focus groups. They have been paraphrased and outlined below:

Recommendations to Government

- The Ministry needs to spend more time in localized schools so policy is relevant to the lived realities of learners.
- Government and schools need to fully subsidize postsecondary application fees for marginalized students with a clear, accessible and transparent process.
- Fund programs and projects that provide workshops and resources to Black parents on how to navigate educational systems and how to support their children's educational success.

Recommendations to Educators and Administrators in School Boards

- All teachers should be required at the beginning of the year to have their students complete learning style assessments, and ensure practices in the classroom are reflecting the learning needs of the students.
- High school students should be provided with more opportunities to learn from and network with professionals in their fields of interest who are reflective of their own cultural and social identities.
- Staff in schools should be more representative of the student demographics, as students believe there is a greater sense of understanding and cultural competency.
- Black students should be encouraged to pursue academic programming and courses in STEM. Students identified that when racialized students are encouraged to pursue courses in STEM, South and East Asian students are encouraged to participate in learning related to those fields of study more than Black students are encouraged.
- Remove applied and locally developed courses as options. Integrate differentiated instruction across all courses and provide adequate resourcing in additional staffing, assistive technologies and accommodations for students who need extra supports to be successful.
• Students need the opportunity to have a say and choice in what and how they are learning in the classroom. Schools need to provide more leadership opportunities for students who are systemically silenced in most educational settings.

• Students should not only be graded and assessed based on the product, but should be assessed on how hard they are working and how much effort is being put into the work. Formal grading and marks should include both process and completion marks.

• Student award and recognition celebrations should not only be focused on academics and athletics. They should also include leadership, potential, social activism, community building and other skill sets that are demonstrated by Black students.

• Schools should have a central credit card so that families that do not have access to credit, can pay the school directly for the postsecondary application fees, if they can afford to do so.

• Make financial supports and programs like OSAP clear and integrated into the grade 10 civics or careers courses, so that all students know how to access OSAP, what is included, what is not, how to apply for bursaries and scholarships, etc.

• Create entrepreneurship programs in schools that are populated primarily with Black youth at both the middle school and high school levels.

• Course content that is culturally relevant, celebrates Afro Diaspora histories and contexts, and provides rich and deep learning opportunities to validate Black youth identities.

• Focus on experiential learning activities, outdoor education sites, and travel opportunities that allow students to explore and feel open to learning in spaces outside of their geographical communities.

Recommendations to Transitional Education & Community-based Programs

• Create a Toronto based Pathways to Education Program accessible to any student who has been in conflict with the law. Not just in specific communities.

Recommendations to the Postsecondary Education Connectors (PSECs) Program

• PSECs should be reflective of the cultures and lived experiences of the Black youth they aim to serve. They should have knowledge of the unique challenges and barriers faced by Black youth from diverse communities across Toronto.
• PSECs should be knowledgeable of the postsecondary education system and have the experience and skillset to support marginalized Black youth on how to navigate the system and advocate for themselves

• PSECs should use a variety of activities to engage Black youth participation ie. arts education, experiential learning, interactive workshops, city tours and trips, mentorship, etc.

• PSECs should use incentives and resources to support Black youth to access educational systems and supports ie. tokens, nutritious snacks and meals, grants, bursaries, honorariums, community-based resources, mentors, etc.

• PSECs should provide leadership opportunities for Black youth to lead and support education/community engagement activities in meaningful ways that build on Black youth’s skillsets and experiences

• PSECs should provide positive and encouraging youth-focused and youth-led spaces for Black youth to explore their educational futures, goals and dreams

• PSECs should ensure spaces and curricula materials are reflective and responsive to the cultures and unique, diverse identities of the Black youth they intend to serve
APPENDIX
Organizational Outreach Email

Hi [NAME OF ORG CONTACT],

My name is [Committee Member Name] and I’m working with a community-based research committee in partnership with a cultural arts & education organization called Stolen From Africa to examine barriers and challenges black youth face to postsecondary education.

We’re leading a community-based research project, funded by the ministry of Ontario, and are hoping to connect with key organizations that are connecting black youth to postsecondary education.

We’re hoping to connect with you and black students, aged 16-25, anytime between now - February 15, for 1hr. We will use this time to give some background info, go through short surveys and facilitate a focus group to get some open feedback. I’ve attached a project summary for your review.

We will provide educators/program leads and youth participants with a gift certificate and food & refreshments.

If you require additional information or would like to connect via phone, please feel free to call me anytime at [416-000-000].

We’d like to connect with you as soon as possible. Please let us know when would be a good time to talk.

Looking forward to connecting with you,

[Committee Member Name]

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Stolen From Africa
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STOLEN FROM AFRICA
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NPO | COMMUNITY RESOURCES | LIFESTYLE GROUP | #ALLDAYSFA EST. 2004
Non-Profit | Clothing | Twitter | Instagram | Youtube | Facebook

Untold, as the saga unfolds, the mystery of our scattered history.
PSE Connectors Research & Design Project Overview
Project Overview

A community-based research project to create Ontario-specific evidence to support the design and implementation of the Postsecondary Education Connectors (PSEC) Initiative under the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan (BYAP). The findings from the research funded through this grant will be incorporated, as appropriate, into the delivery of the Postsecondary Education Connectors (PSEC) program by the organizations that the ministry selects to deliver PSEC programs in the target communities of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), Windsor, and Ottawa.

Stolen From Africa / Volé D’Afrique (SFA) is the research lead. SFA is a national, emerging non-profit arts education organization based in Toronto that promotes the cultural and historical awareness of the African Diaspora.

Project Goals and Objectives

The research will support the design and delivery of programs and services that will improve access to postsecondary education for youth in Ontario, including specifically for Black youth through the new PSEC program under BYAP.

In order to do this, the research will address the following research questions:

1. What specific barriers do Black youth in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) & Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) and Black youth not enrolled in formal education, currently identify as obstacles in accessing PSE?

2. What are their personal stories and experiences? How do they feel about PSE in Canada?

3. What programs and resources are currently in place to support Black youth and students? How many are culturally relevant and engaging? What data exists on successes and challenges of these programs? What types of Black youth are these programs typically engaging? What specific resources do Black youth identify as beneficial to their access to PSE? Are any currently being offered? Are they accessible? Are they effective?

4. How can / does alternative, community-based programming within formal school systems support students in accessing PSE? How does community-based programming outside of schools differ? What are some best practices?

Project Scope

Stolen From Africa (SFA) will undertake a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach and use arts-based reflections with Black youth enrolled and not enrolled in formal education. It will also seek input from
youth identified as “at-risk” from schools in Toronto’s East and West communities, with the lowest graduation rates, to understand their perspectives on accessing PSE and community programs and services related to PSE. It will also collect quantitative and qualitative data from programs that work with the target communities to connect youth to PSE to examine best practices, approaches, and challenges. Research findings will be made available to the public and disseminated to relevant target audiences.

Timelines and Milestones

There are four major milestones for the project, with associated activities for each milestone described in detail below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Milestone Outline</th>
<th>Completion Date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Workplan / Summary of Research Approach and Methodology</td>
<td>January 15, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Data Collection and Analysis Complete</td>
<td>February 26, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Draft Report Complete</td>
<td>March 14, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Final Public Report Complete</td>
<td>March 30, 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Milestone Details

- **Project Workplan and Summary - Research Approach & Methodology**
  - a list of steps / milestones and associated activities and expected dates of completion to achieve the project objectives;
  - a summary of the methodological approach(es) that will be used; and
  - details on the knowledge mobilization / dissemination approach and target audiences.

- **Interviews and Focus Groups Complete**
  - Establish CBPR Committee
  - Recruit participants
  - Conduct focus groups
  - Conduct interviews with PSE connector programs

- **Draft Report Complete**
  - Complete data analysis
  - Submit a draft outline of the final report and supplementary materials, which incorporates all interim findings (with placeholders where necessary), to the Ministry / relevant partner ministries for feedback

- **Final Public Report Complete**
  - Launch a final, publicly available report and supplementary materials which incorporates findings and Ministry / partner feedback and includes recommendations to support the design and delivery of the Postsecondary Connectors initiative.
  - With support from the Ministry, communicate the launch of the report and effectively disseminate the report findings broadly to relevant sectors and relevant ministry and community partners.

This research project is funded by the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan (BYAP) through the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.
Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

We think all students should have equitable access to postsecondary education. We want to collect more information about what may make it hard for some students to go to college or university. The information we gather from this survey will be used by government agencies, educators, youth workers and community members to help improve your access to resources and supports you may need to succeed. If you are attending a community program, we want to know how it is helping you with your educational goals and dreams so the government can provide more resources for those programs to continue to do so.

This survey is confidential. The information you provide cannot be linked back to you and you will not get in trouble for anything you share. Please do not put your name anywhere on this survey.

Please take your time and complete the survey as best as you can. If you have any questions, at any point, please ask the person that gave you the survey for assistance.

Thank you for your input.

* 1. Do you identify as Black?
   - Yes
   - No

* 2. Which communities do you connect to most?
   - Caribbean (ex. West Indian)
   - West African
   - East African
   - African Canadian
   - Afro-Latinx
   - Other (please specify)
* 3. I am:
   - 16 years old
   - 17 years old
   - 18 years old
   - 19 years old
   - 20 years old
   - 21 to 25

* 4. I identify my gender as:
   - Female
   - Male
   - Non-binary / third gender
   - Prefer not to say
   - Prefer to self-describe

* 5. I currently live in:
   - Etobicoke (ex. Rexdale / Lakeshore)
   - North York (ex. Jane and Finch to Yonge and Sheppard)
   - Scaborough
   - East York (ex. West of Victoria Park)
   - Downtown
   - York (ex. Keele & Eglinton / Oakwood & Vaughan)

* 6. I am currently a student in:
   - The Toronto District School Board (TDSB)
   - The Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB)
   - Not in School
   - Other (please specify):

* 7. The highest level of education I have completed is:
   - Grade 9
   - Grade 10
   - Grade 11
   - Grade 12
   - Other (please specify):
* 8. If you are in high school, what type of classes are you taking the most?

- Locally Developed
- Applied or College
- Academic or University
- Other (please specify)

* 9. I believe going to college or university will be beneficial to my future. Please rate on a scale from 0 (not beneficial) to 10 (very beneficial).

* 10. I intend on (check all that apply):

- Applying for college
- Applying for university
- I do not intend on going to post-secondary
- Other (please specify):

* 11. In grade 9, I felt informed about how the courses I chose would impact my ability to apply to college or university. Please rate on a scale from 0 (not informed) to 10 (most informed).

* 12. I have a strong understanding of how to apply to college or university. Please rate on a scale from 0 (do not understand) to 10 (strong understanding).
* 13. If I have a question about college or university, I feel comfortable talking to (check all that apply):

- My parents or guardian
- My guidance counsellor
- My teacher(s)
- A youth worker
- My friends
- Principal or vice-principal
- No one
- Other (please specify):
  
* 14. How supported do you feel by your assigned guidance counsellor? Please rate on a scale from 0 (not supported) to 10 (very supported).

0  

10

* 15. I believe that I have a good chance of getting into college or university. Please rate on a scale from 0 (no chance) to 10 (very good chance).

0  

10

* 16. The following makes it difficult to apply to postsecondary schools (check all that apply):

- The application fee
- I don't know if they will accept my IEP
- My marks
- Post secondary is too expensive
- My school did not offer the courses that I needed
- I won't qualify for OSAP
- The courses I took don't qualify for what I want to apply to
- Conflicts with the law
- No one to explain how things work
- I don't like school
- I have not been encouraged to apply to post secondary
- I don't like the way I'm treated by staff at school
- Other (please specify):
  

* 17. Are you aware of any programs in your school or community that can assist you with applying to college or university?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not sure

* 18. I attend a program that supports my education and encourages me to go to post secondary school.
   - Yes
   - No

19. If answered yes to #18, the program I attend (check all that apply):
   - [ ] assists me with my homework
   - [ ] communicates with my teachers
   - [ ] explores post-secondary opportunities
   - [ ] finds co-op or apprenticeship opportunities
   - [ ] assists me with career planning
   - [ ] Other (please specify):

20. If you answered yes to #18, what is the name(s) of the program(s):

   ____________________________________________________________