

Safe Spaces and Critical Places: Youth Programming and Community Support

Alexandra Arraiz Matute and Emmanuel Tabi

Abstract

In this article we explore the work of two after-school programs in Toronto, Ontario. Our Youth Success (OYS) is a community-based mentoring program dedicated to lowering the push-out rates of students of Spanish and/or Portuguese-speaking descent. In the Youth Speak Program (YSP), community activists use spoken word poetry and rapping as a vehicle for Black students to express their emotional lives. The data we present come from two separate studies which both used ethnographic approaches, focusing on observation and interviews with participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Using Critical Race Theory (CRT), we examine interview data on how the pedagogical relationships developed in these spaces promote the wellbeing of Latinx and Black youth beyond academic outcomes. We argue that these spaces provide insight into the transformative possibilities of critical pedagogies for the wellbeing and healing of communities who have long been marginalized from mainstream institutions.

Introduction and Context

While much scholarship has been dedicated to the inequities in education in the US context, less is known about Latinx and Black students in the Canadian context (Parada et al., 2021). However, both communities continue to be marginalized within Canadian education systems (James, 2012; James & Turner, 2017). In this paper, we take up these issues within the context of Ontario, specifically in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Moving beyond the discourse on academic outcomes, we extend the story around education, race, and academic achievement to include wellbeing as we speak to the places and spaces that support and encourage the emotional lives of these children and youth who report that school is a difficult place for them to learn (Gaztambide-Fernández & Guerrero, 2011; Schugurensky et al., 2009). Our work aims to de-center the conversation around youth and schools from academic achievement to a more holistic wellbeing that envisions a goal of BIPOC youth flourishing, not just surviving a system (Tabi, 2023; Tabi & Rowsell, 2017).

We examine two out-of-school programs that operate in Toronto, known for its diversity and multiculturalism: Our Youth Success (OYS) and the Youth Speaks Program (YSP). Toronto is Canada's largest city, with a population over three million people and almost half of the province's population (Government of Ontario, 2023). While one in four people in Canada identify as part of a racialized group (Government of Canada, 2022), in Toronto this number goes up to 55.7% (Toronto, 2022). This rich context means youth navigate a complex web of stereotypes, assumptions, and communities in their daily lives (Guerrero, 2014; James & Turner, 2017; Schugurensky et al., 2009). However, it also provides youth with community supports like the programs explored in this paper.

To frame the value of youth wellbeing, this article explores the pedagogical relationships between youth in two separate programs that are intentional about their centering of care. By pedagogical relationships, we refer to those that develop within the context of pedagogical encounters, which are premised on reciprocity of care and value students' lived experiences and knowledges. These relationships have been shown to foster youth positive development and counter the deleterious effects of marginalization for racialized youth (i.e., Arraiz Matute 2022a, Chavez & Soep, 2005, Valenzuela, 2010). Our Youth Success (OYS) is a community-based mentoring program that is dedicated to lowering the push-out rates of students of Spanish and or Portuguese-speaking descent in Toronto. The Youth Speak program (YSP) is an after-school program organized by community activists who use spoken word poetry and rapping as a vehicle for Black students to speak to their emotional lives, particularly the difficulties they experience in schools. Through this programming, these activists developed strategies to help students navigate the difficulties they experience within the K–12 education system. As shared by our participants, the relationships built in these two programs are a key reason that participants continue to stay involved year after year; they provide youth a space in which to feel vulnerable and develop trust in each other. In this paper, we focus on how these relationships promote the wellbeing of Latinx and Black youth beyond academic outcomes. We began by providing context for the communities with whom we work. The following section presents some of the literature around barriers Black and Latinx youth face in Canada and how community-based programming has been shown to provide support for youth. The subsequent section speaks to the methods and theoretical framework used in this paper. The final section speaks to three overarching themes that resonated in our work with youth. We end with the lessons learned on the radical possibilities for healing and transformation in these critical spaces.

Literature Review

Blackness in Canada

Unfavorable attitudes toward Black folks in Canada founded on hateful, racist, and stereotypical ideologies around Blackness continue to influence how Black folks are understood, talked about, and referred to within Canada's social imagination (Austin, 2013). This anti-blackness is foundational to the history of Canada (Campbell, 2012), and continues to influence the social and political outcomes of Black lives in Canada, often marginalizing and displacing Black individuals, communities, dreams, and futures through polite yet often covert means of racial discrimination (Campbell, 2012), which in turn negatively influences Black realities and geographies in Canada (McKittrick, 2002). Black youths, particularly Black male youths in Toronto's K–12 education system, continue to experience isolation and marginalization (Dei, 2006; James, 2012; Tabi & Gosine, 2018). Many of these youths use their cultural production as a means to navigate the complex emotional realities of these painful experiences (Gosine & Tabi, 2016; Tabi, 2023).

Latinxs in Canada

The Latin American community in Canada has been characterized by waves of immigration dating back to the 1940s. These waves of migration have been shaped by the sociopolitical context and conflicts in South American and Central American regions (Mata, 1985). This has resulted in a very heterogeneous community, representing over 20 nationalities and with varying degrees of political and civic engagement (Veronis, 2006). Legacies of colonialism and white supremacy embedded in Latin American societies have also shaped how Latinx navigate the racial landscape in Canada (Cahuas & Arraiz Matute, 2020; Veronis, 2010). While we speak about a single “Latinx community,” it’s important to keep in mind that the experiences of youth who identify as Latinx are varied and complex.

Educational Barriers for Latinx and Black Youth in Canada

In framing our exploration into alternative ways of engaging with and creating spaces for racialized youth, it is useful to understand the current context in public education. According to data from Ontario’s school boards, both Latinx and Black communities face lower graduation rates than their peers (R. Brown & Tam, 2017; Peel District School Board, 2021). Black student graduation rates have been growing at one of the fastest rates compared to all other ethno-racial groups in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) (R. S. Brown & Parekh, 2019). However, overall Black student graduation rates are still some of the lowest when compared to other ethno-racial groups in the Board (R. S. Brown & Parekh, 2019; R. Brown & Tam, 2017). In addition, students from both communities are less likely to be prepared for post-secondary options (Robson et al., 2018). Latinx students are less likely to meet provincial standards in standardized measures like the EQAO or be successful in the Ontario Literacy Assessment in secondary (Yau et al., 2011). They are also less likely to apply to post-secondary school (R. Brown & Tam, 2017).

Inside classrooms, the curriculum Black and Latinx students receive is also not reflective of their experiences, histories, or cultures (Turner Consulting Group, 2015). Latinx youth often must overcome stereotypes about Latinxs, perpetuated by the media and the invisibility of Latinxs in the curriculum in Canada (Gaztambide-Fernández & Guerrero, 2011; Simmons et al., 2000). Additionally, Latinx youth face lowered expectations from teachers in addition to a lack of support in the classroom (Mogadime & O’Sullivan, 2017). Latinx students don’t see themselves represented in their peers or teachers, and face culturally insensitive environments in the classroom (Parada et al., 2023).

We also see evidence of institutional and systemic discrimination through processes of special education and school discipline. Black students continue to be overrepresented in behavioral exceptionality categories and special education classes at the school board level (Spence & Cameron, 2019; Tam & Armson, 2022). Similarly, while Black students make up 11% of the TDSB school population, they represent 33% of suspensions and expulsions (Zheng, 2020). Systemic exclusion impacts how learners see themselves and how engaged they are in their education. According to school climate surveys, Black students feel school is a friendly and welcoming place less than other students in the school board; they report feeling less likely to get the help and support they need, have a lower sense of school belonging, and claim to enjoy school less than other students (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2023; Cameron, 2020; Yau, 2017). Similarly, Latinx youth reported feeling that school staff provided very little support in

navigating the school system and helping students succeed (Parada et al., 2021). All of these findings point to the need for additional supports for Black and Latinx students. Often times, this support has come in the form of community-based programs organized outside of school.

Pedagogical Relationships and Community Support

Community-based support programs have a long history, particularly in the US, where programs to serve Black and Brown communities have been around since the 1960s (Kantor & Lowe, 1995). Since then, a growing body of literature has demonstrated the importance of these programs to marginalized youth (i.e., Baldrige et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2005; MacLaughlin, 2000; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006). While there are differences in programming and methods between programs, this literature suggests that relationships are an important part of their success (Yu et al., 2021; Newcomer, 2018; Baldrige et al., 2011; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006). These positive relationships with trusted adults have been shown to increase engagement, self-esteem, and ethnic pride (Newcomer, 2018; Yu et al., 2021; Erbsstein & Fabionar, 2019). We seek to build on the conversation of how these community-based programs promoted youth wellbeing by moving beyond academic achievement as measures of success and looking instead at the possibilities of transformative pedagogies as a site of healing.

Methods

The data presented in this article comes from two separate studies. In both studies, we used an ethnographic approach, focusing on observation and interviews with participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Field notes, interviews, rap lyrics, and poetry were then transcribed and coded. We used both narrative and discourse analysis to analyze the transcripts and develop themes (Blommaert, 2005; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Riessman, 1993). In this paper, we use data from interviews with participants, as well as youth rap lyrics and poetry from one of the programs. We occasionally draw on some of our observational notes for context.

The OYS program consists of youth (grades 1–college) and their mentors—some of the mentors are also university students. The mentoring pairs get assigned at the beginning of the school year and work together for the entire year; sometimes they continue to work together for many years. In the data, we present perspectives shared by both youth and their mentors; given the reciprocal nature of their relationships, having both perspectives was an important part of the study. The mentors in the YSP program are individuals with varying levels of academic achievement; however, they all have experienced a great deal of oppression and marginalization within their K–12 journey. Some of the mentors dropped out of high school, others dropped out and then returned; however, they created these after-school programs to address the needs that they had in the K–12 education system, and they wanted to create a safe space for young Black children and youth to work through the difficulties they were experiencing.

Both authors are people of color (one identifies as Latinx, the other as Black). We come to our work from a shared commitment to social justice, grounded in an ethics of care for the communities we work with.

Alexandra is an immigrant to Canada and has worked with community organizations for over 10 years in family advocacy around the education system. At the time of this study, she had been working with the West Community Hub (WCH) for a few years in the OYS program, first as a volunteer mentor and then as a staff member designing programming for parents and youth. She was therefore a familiar face to the staff, parents, and youth in the program, who felt comfortable to speak about their experiences. Emmanuel was born in Canada to a Grenadian mother and is a community educator, advocate, musician, and spoken word poet. At the time of the study, Emmanuel was an important contributor to Toronto's arts scene. Through these activities, Emmanuel built relationships with other community educators and activists who contributed to the study.

Through discussing the findings of our separate studies with similar community-based programs in the same city, we realized that our participants had articulated very similar experiences. We then decided to go back and look at our data through this shared lens of thinking about these spaces as transformative and conducive to healing. This paper is the result of this joint endeavor, to talk with each other through our communities' experiences and to dream together of a better world.

Theoretical Framework

In our analysis we utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT), as this framework continues to be instrumental in the documentation of how racial identities are conceptualized and (re)produced (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As such, CRT is operationalized within qualitative research paradigms, as it centers on and speaks to the many ways race and racism are systemically rooted within society, as well as the manner in which racialized individuals and communities negotiate racist representations and navigate oppressive barriers (James, 2009; Lopez, 2000; Parker & Lynn, 2002). CRT stands against historic and current racial inquiries by drawing from other epistemologies and disciplines "to guide research that better understands the effects of racism, sexism and classism on people of color" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, pp. 26-27). Most importantly for our work, CRT gives us an epistemological lens through which to understand the lived experiences of racialized youth and how the intentional spaces of OYS and YSP push back against marginalization.

To further center the wellbeing of BIPOC youth in these programs, we mobilize bell hooks' work on healing to conceptualize the work that relationships do within these critical spaces. Through her words, hooks reminds us that teaching is a practice of freedom that requires that educators see their students as unique beings, requiring that we are willing to engage with the humanity in each of us, to establish relationships that recognize each other's spirit as well as our minds (hooks, 1994). This engagement with students is not one-dimensional; it is a bidirectional relationship predicated on authenticity and self-actualization. It is through this intentional relationality that education can become a site of healing and of freedom (hooks, 1994). Furthermore, this site of healing is one that happens in community with others, not in isolation (hooks, 2001). We see this intentional relationality as a key characteristic of these "critical spaces" that we describe in our data. These spaces are premised on the transformative potential of these relationships and creating a site of healing. This is particularly important in our case as we, the authors, explore how these programs that are run by and for communities, become sites of healing and

transformation for youth. We want to move beyond the narratives of Black and Latinx youth as statistics and disengage with the normative assumptions of academic achievement. Instead, our work here highlights the impacts of relationships on youth's wellbeing by focusing on the ways in which they heal from the deleterious effects of the public school system. In the next section, we focus on the ways in which participants narrated their experience of these spaces, before we expand on their possibilities. We will do so by focusing on three themes that emerged from this work. Firstly, we will speak to how building strong community bonds and relationships has proved to be beneficial for both the youth in the programs and their mentors. The following two sections will highlight the importance of not only looking at the academic outcomes of our students, but also continuing to support their holistic selves and wellbeing.

Safe Spaces and Critical Places

In this section, we lay out the themes which describe the safe spaces and critical places that the two programs we worked with foster for Black and Latinx youth in Toronto. These spaces were characterized by important positive relationships that saw youth in a holistic manner and, therefore, conceptualized wellbeing beyond academic achievements to picture youth as thriving.

Importance of Relationships

Remy, a community educator and rap artist, created the YSP after-school program in the neighborhood he grew up in because he saw the disconnect between the youth at the community center he worked at and their parents. This disconnect reminded him of his relationship with his mother. Due to her many jobs, she was often at a loss for why Remy would often get in trouble; there was a disconnect between Remy's reality and his mother's expectations. For Remy, it was vital to build strong relationships with the youth that he served, and that their basic needs were met before he could offer them advice about their academic achievements or general life choices. Youth enter these formal and informal educational spaces as complex and holistic beings; as such, a great deal of empathy and care is needed when supporting them, particularly youth who are often marginalized (Kirkland, 2013; Winn, 2013). Remy's empathy towards the youth he supported grew from being a young Black boy who had to make sense of the poverty, neglect, hunger, and precarious housing he experienced. It is often the youth that are most disenfranchised that are blamed for "depression, hopelessness and suicidal tendencies" (Ginwright & James, 2002, p.31) that they often have to navigate.

For Tania, one of the youth mentors in OYS, the reason that she has continued in the program for six years is simply due to her mentees and the relationship they have developed over five years together. She mentions how every year there is a conversation about coming back to her students:

[The program directors are] like, "You need to come back!" I want to do it, I mean I want to keep working with the program because I still very much believe in what it does. But certainly, if not for [the youth]—because my schedule is so manic—I probably would have stepped back from it but they've kept me going with it.

The mentees themselves also point to the relationships in the program as reasons to continue attending. Anne Marie has been participating in Our Youth Success for seven years, and she says, “They’re really friendly, too, so that helps a lot. I feel comfortable there. . . . It’s like I just belong there. It’s not like you feel weird walking in because everyone’s watching you. And I’ve gotten to know people.” While she attends the program for help with English, it isn’t this academic help that motivates her to wake up early every Saturday morning. Rather, it is the “friendliness” of the program, how the relationships she has built in this space afford a sense of belonging that is not usual for academic spaces.

In both spaces, we observed relationship-building as the primary force drawing youth in. At times when both Black and Latinx students (and their families) are framed as “disengaged” (Edwards & Parada, 2023; Schugurensky et al., 2009), both OYS and YSP saw consistent attendance and continued engagement. Mentors and mentees felt a responsibility to one another, to the transformation that happens in community rather than in isolation (hooks, 1994). The focus on intentional relationships fostered a space where the youth’s whole being was welcomed and valued. Therefore the focus of growth went beyond academics, to a more holistic understanding of success. We explore this theme in the next section.

Going Beyond Academics

For Efe, a community educator, activist, and poet in Toronto, providing a safe space for youth who navigate difficult socio-emotional realities was a driving force in why he created YSP after-school programs throughout the Greater Toronto Area. Efe would often have to move with his family so they could secure work. By the time Efe graduated from high school, he had attended 17 different schools. Efe was very much aware of the difficulties he faced as a young Black man, constantly moving, not able to call a school community home for very long. Efe wanted to create a space that he would have benefited from, a space where he could best prepare the youth in the program for the many unpredictable life experiences they may face. Efe explains that:

Over a 20–30-week period, we would build a performance arts training intensive, but it is also a life skills training intensive and it is twofold because in the creation of art, you have to create life, you have to reflect on life, so we are addressing themes that are causing youth maybe in their mind to write but really they are healing, really they are building upon themselves, building confidence.

Efe’s after school programs would be a space where students who would often miss their academic classes would still attend his program. Efe understood that the academic classes did not provide students with the emotional support they needed and often sought out. Efe created a space where students felt safe to attend and work through some of the difficult emotional realities they lived with, a space where they could foster healing as a community and share their stories through poetry and other forms of cultural production. Such practices are what Marc Lamont Hill (2009) refers to as *wounded healing*, a process in which pain is released and worked through as youth share their lived experiences, trauma and hopes as a method of healing, producing “new possibilities” (p. 249).

Anastasia articulated her favorite part of being a student in OYS: “Being there in a way and just talking because the thing is, I don’t only talk about work. We talk about other things like things that are going

on around the world. We talk about our opinions.” This was significant for her because it stood in contrast to her experience in school, where “you don’t really get to do that.” In her tutoring sessions, she is able to talk about her opinions without being dismissed as “a kid, a student, like you don’t know much.” She elaborates how the kind of relationships she has with her tutor means she “get[s] to talk and be heard.” This extends beyond academic subjects, to encompass current social and political events:

Even social issues like things that we feel, our opinions on some things. [My tutor] makes you feel like your opinion’s valid. It’s not like you’re just a kid and don’t know any better, she actually listens so I like that about her.

Many times, tutor mentors saw their role going beyond academic outcomes. The mentoring relationship often meant that tutor mentors saw themselves as “role models” who could help mentor their students around education much more broadly. Tania, for example, hopes that she had:

instilled in them that they’re looking at education as having value. And not that they didn’t at the time that we started, but I think that now they see it a little more deeply. . . . it’s really more about mentoring and showing them a positive role model, showing them that education has value, I think that’s what it is. Because it really is about forming the personal relationships when you’re paired with the same people over and over again.

Both Anastasia and Tania’s narratives highlight the ways in which the work of the program transcends academic work. Anastasia shows the way in which she feels heard and seen as a person, standing in stark contrast to how she feels in school. The importance of this is backed up by the literature on student engagement and wellbeing (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2023; Klem & Connell, 2004). It is significant that Anastasia puts her experiences in OYS in direct opposition to her experiences in school classrooms.

Creating spaces where students can speak to their emotional life, participate in communal healing, and prioritize their socio-emotional wellbeing is vital in supporting and validating the lived experiences of our youth. OYS and YPS provide youth with the space where their ideas and lived experiences are not dismissed, but centered. This kind of engagement with the whole student as an important piece of the work OYS and YSP do. We delve more into this in the next section.

Seeing Students for Their Whole Selves

To teach for liberation, education “must name and link the issues that schools have difficulty addressing, including racism, poverty, gang violence and drugs” (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996, p. 178). Such issues deeply impact the youth that Efe supports. Efe explains that if the curriculum does not address the issues that deeply effect the students, how are the students going to believe that the curriculum was created with them in mind? Efe created a space where students can come with their whole selves and collectively theorize and make sense of the socio-political factors that most impact their lives. As Efe explains:

These spaces are impactful because these youth can come with their full selves, who they are, be their authentic self. They are not too loud, but loud enough; they don’t take up too much space, but enter a space made for them; they are not complained about, but shown compassion.

For Efe, it is imperative that if healing is to take place for youth who are often marginalized by the institutions that claim to serve them, to facilitate healing and freedom, these youth must know that this after-school program was created for them by someone who shares many of the lived experiences that they do; someone who sees themselves in these youth, who has lived many of the difficulties they currently face. It is imperative that if we are going to support historically marginalized youth, we must engage in a pedagogy that centers how these youth speak to, seek, and make sense of freedom (hooks, 1994).

For Maria, OYS provides a place of belonging as well: “There is a sense of finding a place, a spot where I feel comfortable. I feel all right. Not comfortable as in lazy comfortable, but like... I can contribute some things here.” As an educator, she finds this space different from other teaching spaces she has been in before—where she didn’t feel that she quite fit in. Maria goes on to speak about how this is significant for the work she does with youth. She sees herself in her students through her own history of schooling, specifically around mental health:

I saw myself in all of them in that they are so anxious They all started off super anxious about school. I would always tell them, “Listen, I was so anxious about, like, we’re going to break it down” and I’d be like, “See, you did that. If you can do that, you can do this” and then when I’d finally get them there or we would get them there, I’d be like “told ya.”

Through her own experience of struggling with mental health and schooling, Maria forged an initial connection to begin developing a relationship with her students. It also provided her with the perspective of how to approach teaching and learning with her students in order to address that anxiety. This experiential knowledge informed her own pedagogy in her tutoring sessions, and allowed her to address not only their academic needs but also their personal wellbeing, to reduce their anxiety and increase their confidence about school.

In some cases, the way that mentors identified with the situation their mentees were in created safe spaces for youth to explore the experiences of being marginalized in the school system together. John was one of the OYS mentors who gave his personal number to his students, so that they could be in touch if they needed to be—extending their relationship beyond the tutoring session into their personal lives. He explains:

I saw a little bit of myself in them because, you know, I’m in academia now, but in high school I had awful grades. Like if you told me I was going to end up in a Master’s program, I wouldn’t believe it. So I understand that position of being unfulfilled in high school and unmotivated and just having no desire or sense of direction, sense of purpose. I know that gets better. . . . I saw that in them . . . I wanted to empower them and help them get there.

Through his own experience as a young Latinx man in the school system, who had low expectations thrust upon him of what his post-secondary options would be, John understands in an embodied way how this affects the motivation for students in the system. In both programs, mentors’ practice was centered on understanding and compassion for what mentees may be experiencing. In the narratives shared, we see a preoccupation with understanding Black and Brown youths’ lives outside of the classroom/program space—and a validating of those experiences and feelings. Through this practice, we witnessed spaces that centered success and wellbeing in ways that moved beyond surviving a violent academic system. In the next section, we explore the lessons learned about the radical possibilities of healing and transformation.

Conclusion

Youth Well-Being: Moving from Surviving to Healing and Transformation

In looking through the narratives for both programs, we reflect here on lessons learned about healing. Through the narratives of youth, we see that relationships emerged as the most critical factor in their experience. Following hooks' (1994) call for seeing relationality as a site of healing, we see that youth cite the strong relationships they develop as a critical aspect of their involvement with Our Youth Success and the Youth Speak Program. Mentors' own journeys trying to navigate the systems that marginalize them, whether successful or not, lead them to try and change that experience for others. The experience of navigating such violent systems impacts the way that youth feel about themselves as learners and how they come to engage with educational institutions (Delgado Bernal, 2006). It is not surprising then, that mentors' schooling experiences have impacted the ways in which they think about learning, drawing them to programs for youth like them. They then develop these caring relationships with students who in some way they feel a kinship with. Through their narratives, we see that this kinship is founded on seeing themselves in their students. Through developing these relationships, they hope their mentees can avoid those same negative experiences, as they themselves heal from their own.

Returning to Hill's (2009) concept of *wounded healing*, this exchange of experiences, and at time strategies, is reflective of a process of exchanging stories and creating moments of catharsis and opportunities for critical engagement that provides new ways of knowing and being. We see, through the narratives of participants from both programs, how these sites of healing support conversations around overcoming barriers within schools and extended to thinking about the wellbeing of youth in the entirety of their lives. Such work allows those who participate in this exchange to express their emotional lives, creating a space where "what we feel within and dare to make real... our fears, our hopes, our cherished terrors" (Lorde, 1984, p. 373) are acknowledged, believed, and cared for. It is in this way that mentors continuously saw youth for their holistic selves—not just who they were in school. Their relationships often extended beyond the program, to provide support to youth in their personal lives as well. Whether this was to navigate personal relationships or make personal decisions, the trust and compassion that mentors showed their students created a space where youth felt comfortable to discuss these aspects of themselves. In part, this was driven by the mentors' own experiences of marginalization and belonging.

Moreover, the schooling experiences of the mentors deeply informed their "pedagogical desires" (Britzman, 2006) to participate in OYS and YSP as well as develop these relationships with their mentees. In their stories, the young mentors position their mentees as reflections of themselves in their past schooling experiences; they are now the figure of mentorship that they wished they had had, or that they had in some opportunities. Therefore, their own participation in spaces like OYS and YSP, marked as they are by the cultural and racial identifications that these youth often experience as stigmatizing, provide a space for them to enact a pedagogy they didn't experience. Through a pedagogical relationship based on trust, care, and respect, mentors can symbolically rewrite the negative schooling experiences of the past.

In this sense, our second learning from looking at how these programs worked was the reciprocity of healing. The relationships that were built in the program enabled healing not just for mentees but also for mentors. This was significant because many of the mentors were also youth who were in university. Therefore, we see that these sites of healing and transformation impacted youth on multiple levels; and speak to the transformative potential of community-based programs as “critical places” for marginalized youth.

Community-based education programs for marginalized youth like the ones explored in this article, offer a vital bridge between formal and informal educational settings. Formal educational/schooling settings are an important part of youths’ lives, but, as shown, they fall short of meeting the needs of their diverse students. Community-based programs, on the other hand, possess the flexibility to adapt programming and methodologies to resonate with the lived experiences of these youth, fostering a deeper engagement with learning and, by extension, promoting their wellbeing. By leveraging the strengths of both formal and informal settings, these programs can create holistic learning environments that empower marginalized youth to navigate complex social, economic, and cultural landscapes. A more collaborative relationship between formal institutions and community-based initiatives can facilitate the exchange of resources, expertise, and insights, ultimately benefiting students and educators. Exploring partnerships with post-secondary institutions and school boards enhances program access while also working against deficit narratives (Arraiz Matute, 2022b). Similarly, the critical pedagogies work of community-based programming can inform best practices for educators working with all youth. Moving beyond seeing students as their academic narratives to see each other as fully human, as bell hooks implores us to do, is transformative for all youth.

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Alexandra Arraiz Matute, Assistant Professor, Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, Carleton University, is a passionate community educator and organizer. Her research and pedagogical interests lie at the intersections of identity, culture, race, and migration. Past research has focused on the importance of relationships in teaching and learning as a site of healing and resistance for marginalized communities in the mainstream education system. Her approach to teaching is grounded in anti-oppression, equity, and feminist theories; she believes in honoring diverse knowledges while pushing ourselves out of our comfort zone to learn from each other.



Emmanuel Tabi, Assistant Professor, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University, completed his doctoral degree in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE/University of Toronto. He has also successfully completed a post-doctoral appointment through the Black Child and Youth Studies Network at the University of Windsor. He holds an M. Ed degree in Human Development and Applied Psychology. His intersectional Black Studies frameworks, strong arts-based and community-engaged scholarship with/in Black communities, and his wide experience working with school boards to address issues of equity, position him at the cutting edge of crucial education conversations and school-community-university collaborations.