Pathways to Healing and Thriving:
Culturally Responsive Mental Health Programs for Black Youth in Toronto

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Abstract

Black youth face unique challenges stemming from constant exposure to systemic and cultural racism, discrimination, and lack of access to culturally responsive services meeting their needs, which significantly impacts their emotional well-being, career trajectories, and civic engagement. The research project explores the benefits of a culturally responsive program called Catharsis offered by the non-profit organization Generation Chosen, which focuses on supporting Black youth with their mental health, emotional intelligence, and civic engagement. Data was collected between December 2022 and April 2023. Surveys and focus groups were administered to Black youth aged 15 to 20 in Toronto, Canada, who attended programming in the Jane and Finch community known as a racialized under-resourced neighbourhood. Twenty-nine surveys and two focus groups were administered, totalling 55 respondents. Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework was applied to centre the lived experiences of the youth and listen to their concerns and ideas as counter-narratives. Thematic analysis and triangulation of the data indicated that culturally responsive, trauma-informed programming can enhance emotional intelligence and lead to better coping mechanisms to manage stress and cope with systemic barriers. Participants reported improved life skills and mental health by accessing culturally responsive mental health service providers and engaging with staff who had similar lived experiences who modelled vulnerability as a form of strength and maturity. The research contributes to filling in the research gap in the Canadian context around the importance of culturally responsive, trauma-informed programming for Black youth and how it can foster healthy identity development and larger community benefits.

Keywords: trauma-informed, mental health, Black youth, culturally responsive, emotional intelligence
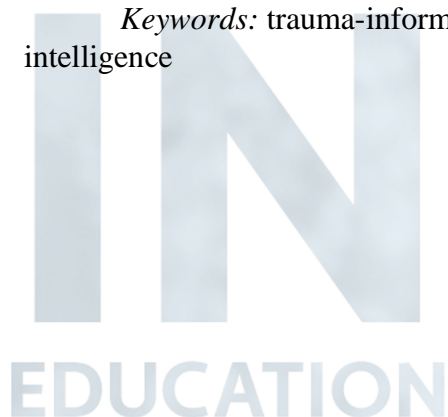
Introduction

In today's multicultural society, Black youth face unique challenges stemming from systemic racism, discrimination, and lack of access to culturally responsive services, which significantly impact their emotional well-being, career trajectories, and civic engagement (Alvarez, 2020; Bailey et al., 2023; Brandford, 2020; Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, 2019; Eizadirad, 2017; James, 2017; Hanna, 2019; Maynard, 2022; McMurtry & Curling, 2008). Given the profound effects of systemic inequities, this research project explored the benefits of a culturally responsive program offered by a Black-led and Black-serving non-profit organization called *Generation Chosen*, focusing on mental health, emotional intelligence, and civic engagement. Emotional intelligence (EI) as defined by Generation Chosen (2024) examines how individuals function and perform under duress. It refers to "the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's emotions effectively, as well as empathize with others" (para. 4).

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework (Leonardo, 2013), this study employed surveys and focus groups to engage predominantly Black youth aged 15 to 20 in Toronto, Canada, who participated in programming within the Jane and Finch community. This is a community in Toronto recognized for its racialized and under-resourced characteristics. The data collection process, conducted from December 2022 to April 2023, was designed to intentionally prioritize storytelling, ensuring that participants' lived experiences were expressed authentically and amplified. Twenty-nine surveys and two focus groups were administered, with 55 respondents contributing to the findings. Thematic analysis and triangulation were utilized to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data. The objective was to gather insights about Generation Chosen's trauma-informed Catharsis program, designed to provide Black youth and young adults with the soft skills necessary to navigate adverse emotional disturbances and interpersonal relationships fraught with psycho-social tensions (Generation Chosen, 2024, para. 1). The research questions guiding this study include: What are the lived experiences, particularly barriers and significant stressors, for Black youth living in an under-resourced community in Toronto? What are the benefits of accessing culturally responsive, trauma-informed programming? How can such programming foster positive self-identity development and community engagement and facilitate healing from trauma?

This study highlights the importance of providing spaces where Black youth can articulate their experiences, predominantly challenges in navigating systemic racism and connecting them with mental health services for healing and thriving. Although many studies have examined trauma-informed practices in educational and alternative community settings (McCallops et al., 2019; Skinner-Osei et al., 2019; Zarifsanaiey et al., 2022), few have focused on racialized trauma within programs offered by non-profit organizations (Bailey et al., 2023; Eizadirad et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2013). This gap is crucial to address, given the increased systemic barriers faced by Black identities in their interactions with institutions and exposure to inequitable policies and practices outside of schools and in the justice system (Government of Canada, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these systemic disadvantages, particularly for Black identities from under-resourced communities (Causadias et al., 2022; Eizadirad & Sider, 2020; Eizadirad et al., 2022; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Toronto Foundation, 2023). As Abdul-Adil and Suárez (2021) point out,

> Youth exposed to community violence usually experience a myriad of adverse consequences with multiple difficulties reported even among those who are "fortunate" to survive violent exposures and incidents. Traumatic stress, one of the most commonly

reported consequences associated with youth exposed to community violence, is particularly prevalent among urban, low-income ethnic minority youth, many of whom are already suffering from significant socio-economic disparities and poly-victimization vulnerabilities. (p. 334)

In response, there is a pressing need for programming that not only addresses emotional well-being but also acknowledges and incorporates the cultural realities and experiences of Black youth. This research contributes to filling a significant gap in the Canadian context by exploring the role of such programming in fostering positive self-identity development for Black youth.

Author Positionalities

Outlining the positionality of the authors in research exploring trauma in Black youth from a CRT perspective is critical to transparently acknowledge the researcher's own social location, biases, privileges, and influences. The information also provides a contextual understanding of the study's framing for the readers (Hanna, 2019; Lopez, 2003; Matias, 2016). This promotes reflexivity, allowing readers to assess how the authors' perspectives and lived experiences shape the interpretation and analysis of the data.

Marcella Bollers (she/they) prefers to go by the name Nawesa. She is of Afro-Guyanese heritage and was born in downtown Toronto. They lived part of their early childhood in Regent Park, which historically has been another racialized under-resourced community in Toronto and recently undergone gentrification. She later moved to the east end with her family to the Upper Beaches neighbourhood. They graduated from the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, specializing in Social Justice and Diversity.

Ardavan Eizadirad (he/him) immigrated to Canada in 1998 as an immigrant from Iran and grew up in Toronto, Canada. His grade six teacher, Mr. Eric Tiessen, built a great relationship with him and mentored him to overcome the challenges of being an English as a Second Language learner. Mr. Tiessen encouraged Ardavan to play basketball as a tool to express his anger and frustrations. Ardavan fell in love with the sport, and the life skills and discipline he gained from playing competitive basketball helped him drastically. Through basketball, he was connected with numerous caring adults who supported him in navigating challenges in life on and off the basketball court. After high school, Ardavan attended university, where he met Dwayne and Joseph, the co-founders of Generation Chosen. They all pursued teaching as a career and have kept in touch through various community projects and activism initiatives. Ardavan is now an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University. The two co-authors met while Ardavan was teaching a graduate course titled 'Social Work with Communities and Organizations' in the Social Work program at the University of Toronto.

History of the Jane and Finch Community:
A Case Study of Systemic Oppression and Neglect

The Jane and Finch neighbourhood is a well-known community in northwest Toronto that is not adequately resourced with opportunities and infrastructure compared to predominantly white and higher socioeconomic status neighbourhoods (Ahmadi, 2018; Eizadirad, 2017; Narain, 2012; Richardson, 2008; Williams et al., 2013). Our analysis prioritizes a neighbourhood-level comparison focusing on the Jane and Finch community as a case study. Gorski (2018) outlines various "dimensions of the educational opportunity gap" (p. 103), which are helpful in analyzing disparities in opportunities amongst schools and communities in different neighbourhoods. Some

factors to consider include differences in school funding, availability of resources, student-to-teacher ratios, opportunities for family involvement, and the extent of access to various technologies. By extension, we refer to the term "opportunity gap" (Abudiab et al., 2023), which refers to the intersection of systemic inequities that create barriers for minoritized identities and communities to access opportunities to achieve their full potential. The opportunity gap can be compared in terms of individuals, schools, neighbourhoods, regions, or countries. Whereas the achievement gap (Knoester & Au, 2017) examines outcomes on tests as the barometer for identifying the magnitude of inequities in education, the opportunity gap (Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, 2019; James, 2017) provides a more holistic community analysis going beyond the individual realm to explore the systemic inequities that serve as barriers impacting student achievement in schools across different social groups (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2013; Carter & Welner, 2013).

Historically and up until now, the Jane and Finch community's identity has been characterized by unemployment, single-parent households, and a high percentage of racialized peoples, which makes it a constant target of negative media portrayals and stereotypes (Ahmadi, 2018; Braganza, 2020; Richardson, 2008; Williams et al., 2013). The neighbourhood attracts newcomers and immigrants due to its lower rent and subsidized housing. Residents are predominantly from the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, South America, and India (Richardson, 2008). Initially, the land was taken care of by Indigenous Peoples (Downsview Weston Action Community with assistance from York University's Community Relations Department, as cited in Eizadirad, 2017). In the 1400s, through colonial tactics associated with violence, Indigenous Peoples were displaced by European settlers. Subsequently, the land was claimed by the Government of Canada and appropriated for different uses, including accelerated building of apartments to meet housing demands after World War Two. As Eizadirad (2017) points out, "This linear style of hollow urban planning, without much thought to the internal infrastructure of the neighbourhood, led to the population of Jane and Finch expanding from 1,301 in 1961 to 33,030 in 1971, which included the establishment of 21 high-rise apartment buildings" (p. 29). The neighbourhood continued to experience exponential growth into the 1970s and 1980s without adequate resources and infrastructure, contributing to the rise in unemployment and crime associated with a lack of opportunities for the residents (Ahmadi, 2018; Narain, 2012; Richardson, 2008). Below are various statistics about more recent demographics of the Humber River-Black Creek neighbourhood, which includes the Jane and Finch community:

- 78% are visible minorities compared to 56% city-wide.
- Black (25%), South Asian (14%), and Southeast Asian (10%) are the most predominant visible minorities.
- $37,240 is the average income which is $24,810 less than the Toronto average.
- 31.4% of housing is subsidized housing.
- 64% of the residents are first-generation immigrants, significantly higher than the Toronto-wide average of 53%.
- 28% are refugees, a higher number compared to the Toronto average of 18%.
- 41% of its residents have a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree compared to the City-wide average of 62%.
- 58% labour force participation rate compared to 64% City-wide average (City of Toronto, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2021).

The majority of the residents of Jane and Finch continue to be visible minorities and immigrants (Ahmadi, 2018). The neighbourhood continues to be a site of systemic oppression and institutional abandonment when it comes to the opportunity gap. Residents continue to experience systemic racism, state violence, and oppression, which shows up in the forms of inadequate housing, food insecurity, lack of resources, and inequitable social policies (Eizadirad, 2017; Richardson, 2008). The roots of the problems are in the intergenerational impact of colonization intersecting with poverty, racism, racial/ethnic, and gender inequalities (Braganza, 2020; Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, 2019; Gorski, 2018; Government of Canada, 2022). We specially name and emphasize that the current conditions of the Jane and Finch community are largely influenced and driven by anti-Black racism, white supremacy, deficit thinking, and the devaluation of racialized persons (James, 2017; Maynard, 2022; McMurtry & Curling, 2008).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Storytelling

The theoretical framework for this research project combines CRT with storytelling (Garo & Lawson, 2019; Solinger et al., 2008; Zarifsanaiey et al., 2022). CRT is crucial for understanding the multifaceted experiences of Black youth in under-resourced communities (Dixson & Rousseau, 2016; Gajaria et al., 2021; Leonardo, 2013; Lopez, 2003). By examining how societal structures perpetuate disparities in education, access to opportunities, and extent of social mobility (Blackburn, 2019; Carter & Welner, 2013; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Gorski, 2018; James, 2017), CRT moves beyond individual-level analysis to spotlight the influence of historical inequities and institutional factors contributing to creating magnitudes of disadvantage.

A central tenet of CRT is the privileging of stories and counter-stories, especially those told by people of colour. Lopez (2003) highlights this approach, explaining that CRT scholars recognize two differing accounts of reality: the dominant reality, which appears "ordinary and natural" to most, and a racial reality that has been "filtered out, suppressed, and censored" (p. 84). This research applies CRT to centre the lived experiences and perspectives of Black youth as counter-narratives, captured through surveys and focus groups. These youths' embodied experiences at school and in their communities, along with their emotions, are documented and interpreted as critical data reflecting how they navigate systemic disadvantage and, more importantly, how they cope with such challenges.

The use of personal narratives in this context is not only methodologically significant but also serves a healing purpose by centring the lived experiences of the Black youth as told through their own words. Bowman (2018) argues that storytelling is a fundamental human need, allowing individuals to express their concerns and be heard. In alignment with CRT, our methodology triangulated data collected through surveys, creating opportunities for youth to expand on their stories and lived experiences further through the focus groups. The intersection of storytelling and CRT provided a framework that acknowledges the lived experiences and emotions of Black youth as valuable, insightful data. By centring their expressions of racialized pain and trauma, we present counternarratives to dominant discourses that are often proclaimed as neutral and colour-blind but are, in fact, harmful. These dominant discourses are often saturated with neoliberal and meritocracy ideologies that focus on individualistic factors rather than examining systemic conditions that impact access to opportunities (Hanna, 2019; Matias, 2016; Yancy, 2016). Therefore, centring counter-narratives is significant and vital for disrupting deficit thinking about Black identities and communities and amplifying their concerns in ways that advocate for personal and systemic change. The youth narratives help identify systemic gaps within institutions and how to address them to help Black youth thrive despite being in vulnerable circumstances (Chioneso et

al., 2020). Overall, CRT seeks not just to analyze but to catalyze meaningful societal transformation toward equity and justice, in the process empowering Black voices and fostering critical thinking and activism.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Characteristics of Research Participants

Generation Chosen (https://www.generationchosen.ca/) offers culturally responsive programs and services within the Jane and Finch community. As an organization, they focus on four key pillars which have trauma-informed practices embedded in their philosophical fabric. As Skinner-Osei et al. (2019) remind us,

> Developing a trauma-informed programming involves cultivating an environment that recognizes the impact of traumatic childhood experiences "while striving for a physically and psychologically safe environment for both youth and staff in detention" (Pickens, 2016, p. 226) […] trauma-informed care [TIC] is an evidence-based practice that teaches service providers and their organizations about the triggers and vulnerabilities of trauma survivors and employs effective interventions to treat traumatic responses (2015). TIC "involves understanding, anticipating, and responding to peoples' expectations and needs, and minimizing the chances of re-traumatizing someone who is trying to heal […]" (SAMHSA, 2015). (pp. 10-11)

The four pillars of Generation Chosen are *Mental Health, Emotional Intelligence, Education,* and *Civic Engagement.* Led by Black staff and a team of professionals, Generation Chosen is devoted to enhancing the emotional intelligence of Black youth and young adults from underserved communities. They focus on interrupting the intergenerational cycles of poverty, disenfranchisement, and trauma by facilitating access to mental health providers, educational programs, financial literacy, mentorship, and financial support for post-secondary education and business startups.

The research focused on Generation Chosen's trauma-informed Catharsis Program. The program participants are Black youth who live in the Jane and Finch community. Through weekly evening programming led by Black mentors, the youth are encouraged to share their narratives reflecting their identities and lived experiences. The program is geared towards providing Black youth with the soft skills to navigate adverse emotional disturbances and psycho-social tensions. For those seeking therapeutic support, the program also offers free therapy with a wide range of therapy streams, including art therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy.

The research project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and approved by a university research ethics board. At the project's outset, we established a collaborative process with the leadership team at Generation Chosen. We held monthly meetings with co-founders Joseph and Dwayne to co-construct survey questions and finalize the timelines for administering the surveys and the focus groups. This collaborative approach ensured that the questions were culturally relevant to the Black youth participating in the study.

The Catharsis program was offered in cycles from September 2022 to April 2023. Data was gathered in December 2022 and April 2023, coinciding with the conclusion of each cohort's 4-month participation in the program. Surveys were administered anonymously to twenty-nine youth participants through Qualtrics, a secure data collection platform with servers located in Canada. The sample size of twenty-nine surveys was selected based on the availability of

participants in the program's cohort. While not large, it provides rich, in-depth qualitative insights (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The focus on a smaller group allowed for more detailed and individualized narratives. The survey took approximately twenty minutes to complete and included a combination of open-ended and Likert scale questions. It was designed to capture identity-based demographic information as well as participants' experiences in the Catharsis program. To enrich our understanding and ensure the validity of the data, we triangulated the survey results with insights from two focus groups. The first focus group was conducted in December 2022 with 10 participants and the second in April 2023 with 16 participants. Both focus groups were held in person at Emery Collegiate, a high school where the program is offered on weekday evenings. Each focus group lasted 60 minutes and was facilitated by the co-authors. In total, we gathered data from twenty-nine survey respondents and twenty six focus group participants, with some overlap in participation. Among the 55 respondents, 15 identified as female and 40 as male. The average age of participants was 17 years old, with the majority coming from African Caribbean backgrounds, including Black, Somali, and Asian (South Asian and Filipino) communities. As a gesture of appreciation for their time and contributions, each research participant received a $25 gift card.

Data Analysis: Emerging Themes from Surveys and Focus Groups

Data from surveys and focus groups were systematically examined by the authors using CRT as a guiding paradigm, alongside thematic analysis as a methodology (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). The authors read through the focus group transcripts and survey responses and compared notes to identify and code recurring keywords (Miles et al., 2014). These codes were not only grounded in the participants' lived experiences but also aligned with key trends in the literature review. For example, recurring keywords like 'trauma,' 'stress,' and 'supports' were coded from participant narratives, and related codes were grouped to form overarching themes such as 'culturally responsive programming' and 'supportive staff's influence'. Through this process, the narratives of Black youth, particularly their descriptions of what effective programming looks like and how it aids their healing from trauma, were instrumental in shaping the study's thematic framework. This coding process facilitated the emergence of prominent themes, including the significance of culturally responsive programming in boosting confidence and engagement, the role of relatable staff in creating safer spaces, and the impact of accessing experiential learning opportunities to strengthen cultural community connections. These themes were then used to structure the findings, with examples from the participants' responses illustrating how the themes manifested in their experiences. Through this thematic analysis, the research team was able to draw meaningful connections between the participants' experiences and broader social and educational challenges faced by Black youth.

Theme #1: Increased Confidence and Engagement Through Access to Culturally Responsive Programming and Access to Black Mental Health Practitioners

Survey and focus group responses from Generation Chosen participants reveal the significant impact that culturally responsive programming has on their confidence and engagement. For example, one participant shared how learning about "the economy of society and the difference between rich and wealthy people" empowered them. They explained that this lesson, which focused on the topic of "generational wealth," helped them understand systemic wealth disparities in relation to their own lived experiences, particularly how historical and structural factors in Jane and Finch have limited their access to economic opportunities. This understanding made them feel more prepared to make informed financial decisions and advocate for economic justice within their

community. The participant specifically remarked, "It made me realize how the rich get richer historically and how we can also make smart choices for our community." This sentiment demonstrates how programming that integrates discussions of systemic inequities within culturally relevant contexts helps participants see themselves as agents of change, capable of addressing issues that directly affect them and their communities.

Another participant highlighted the value of learning about "Black mental health and emotional intelligence," a topic rarely covered in traditional education but highly pertinent to their personal and community challenges. They underscored the importance of such programming in providing culturally specific knowledge which addressed the stressors faced by Black youth, including discrimination, racial profiling, and cultural disconnection. These challenges, often compounded by underrepresentation and exclusion in school curricula for Black youth, have significant emotional and psychological effects contributing to increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Gajaria et al., 2021; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Maynard, 2002).

Beyond creating spaces to talk about relevant topics with program participants, Generation Chosen connects participants with Black mental health practitioners, ensuring accessibility through no-cost services. Culturally responsive programming helped reduce stress in program participants by creating a space where Black youth can see themselves and their cultural realities reflected in the content, fostering positive identity development and facilitating healing from traumas (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016; Braganza, 2020; Imad, 2020; McCallops et al., 2019). This type of programming is not just about imparting knowledge. It is about meeting the specific needs of Black youth in a way that acknowledges their lived experiences and neighbourhood realities. One participant expressed that through Catharsis, they "learned to love themself," illustrating how programming that centres on Black identities can foster personal growth and self-acceptance. Another participant described the program as "A safe space where you can be vulnerable. They do not judge you, and you can talk about issues that impact you."

Culturally responsive programming is intentionally designed to address systemic barriers that impact Black youth while also providing access to opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable or unaffordable, such as learning about financial literacy education, explanations of debt and credit scores, experiencing outdoor excursions like camping, and support for entrepreneurial initiatives. These culturally nuanced activities offered by Generation Chosen to participants promoted a sense of belonging and cultural identity, contributing to improved emotional well-being. Additionally, incorporating culturally specific mental health practices such as meditation and traditional healing methods (e.g., djembe drumming, dance, healing circles, and storytelling) further enhanced emotional regulation and stress management among the Black youth. Many participants remarked that Generation Chosen "teaches life skills," "talks to you on your level," "provides the resources we need," and "models the application of emotional intelligence in real-world scenarios." These strategies, combined with culturally responsive practices, were significant in improving the mental health and confidence of program participants. As one participant noted, "We are given space to be ourselves, and this makes it feel more like a community."

Theme #2: Relatable Staff Creating Brave and Safer Spaces by Modeling Vulnerability and How to Manage Stressors

Survey and focus group responses emphasized the pivotal role that relatable staff played in creating brave and safer spaces for participants. Staff members were repeatedly mentioned as being influential by modeling vulnerability and providing guidance on managing stressors and talking about issues that impact participants in their neighbourhood. One participant noted, "The staff are great. They always listen to us and treat us like equals. I trust them with my problems because they've gone through similar things in the community." This quote underscores how staff shared their own experiences with adversity, making them more relatable to the youth. By discussing their personal struggles with racism, economic hardship, or mental health, staff not only build trust but also showed youth how to manage similar stressors in their own lives and provide them with the hope that they can overcome challenges. For example, youth in the focus group and surveys expressed how they know "lots of people who went to jail or have gotten shot," experiences that staff could relate to and help them navigate. This modelling of vulnerability allowed participants to feel safer discussing personal challenges, knowing that the staff can empathize and offer practical support based on lived experiences and, as an extension, connect them with mental health practitioners of the same race.

Participants emphasized how transparency and relatability modelled by program staff fostered an environment where they felt understood and supported. For example, one participant remarked, "The staff talk to us, not at us, and that makes all the difference." This reflects the effort of staff to engage youth in respectful, two-way conversations, further reinforcing a sense of empowerment among the participants. Additionally, the focus on shared cultural backgrounds and race between staff and youth helps solidify these connections. As one participant expressed, "The staff know what it's like growing up in a place like this. They don't judge. They get it." Relatable staff who share similar cultural and community backgrounds created an atmosphere where participants felt safer expressing their emotions and being vulnerable to discuss life struggles or past traumas. This connection is not just about understanding but also about modelling emotional intelligence in real-time. Staff often shared stories about how they have handled stress, trauma, or failure, and this openness served as a real-life demonstration of coping strategies (Anucha et al., 2017; Bailey et al., 2023; Blackburn, 2019; Day et al., 2016). For instance, one participant highlighted that a staff member shared how they navigated feelings of anger and frustration growing up in the neighbourhood and losing a friend to gun violence, which helped the participant open up and share and, by extension, learn to manage their own emotions more effectively.

Through Catharsis, youth are encouraged to reflect on their emotions and learn how to manage external pressures such as peer pressure, love, and body image. These topics are central to the weekly programming, where consistency and staff modeling of vulnerability provide participants with tools for emotional awareness and coping. One participant shared, "At first, I didn't want to talk about my feelings, but seeing how open the staff are made me feel comfortable. Now, I'm better at expressing myself." This newfound willingness to engage in more forthright communication reflects how the program creates an environment of trust, enabling participants to confront their challenges in a supportive and affirming space. CRT supports this focus on fostering trust and emotional safety by centering the lived experiences of marginalized youth and validating the importance of culturally relevant and affirming spaces in overcoming systemic barriers (Lopez, 2003; Matias, 2016).

Generation Chosen also ensures that youth have access to social workers and therapists, recognizing that mental health support must be both culturally relevant and accessible. For many participants, discussing personal topics related to violence, trauma, and systemic inequities can be emotionally taxing and triggering. The inclusion of culturally aligned social workers and therapists addresses this need, creating avenues for deeper healing and growth. Social workers, while distinct from the everyday staff, are integral to the program's holistic approach. As one participant described, with the guidance of a social worker, they "learned how to talk about feelings within a year and articulate feelings without feeling anxiety." This demonstrates the critical role of professional mental health support in equipping youth with emotional regulation skills and coping mechanisms.

The program's relationship-building efforts, such as shared meals and discussions, further foster a sense of community. These culturally relevant practices align with CRT's emphasis on creating counter spaces that resist deficit thinking and center collective well-being (Eizadirad et al., 2022). For instance, one participant noted, "I've seen so many people in my community end up in jail or worse, but the staff here get it. They've been through it and help us see other ways out." This reflects how staff leverage their lived experiences to provide practical guidance, helping youth navigate not only emotional well-being but also broader life decisions. Another participant remarked, "Before, I used to overreact, and now I'm more calm," underscoring the direct influence of staff guidance on participants' emotional growth. These moments of connection and growth demonstrate how culturally relevant relationship-building promotes emotional resilience and self-regulation among youth.

Participants frequently highlighted the importance of having Black mentors and leaders within the program. These mentors, through their shared cultural and lived experiences, create a safer and trusting environment where youth feel understood and valued. As one participant shared, "I don't feel safe going to my parents or even discussing certain issues with my friends, but I can talk to staff in the program." This sentiment illustrates the critical role of relatable staff in providing youth with a secure space to explore sensitive issues that they may not feel comfortable addressing elsewhere. Additionally, participants reported significant benefits from working with Black social workers, including learning to articulate their feelings and addressing personal issues with greater clarity and confidence. By recognizing the effects of trauma associated with feelings of isolation or depression and equipping participants with tools to process and heal from it, Generation Chosen exemplifies CRT's principle of centering the voices and needs of marginalized communities to disrupt systemic inequities. This program validates participants' cultural identities and lived experiences, helping them build positive self-concepts and stronger connections to their community. In doing so, it fosters a sense of belonging, enabling youth to navigate systemic barriers and envision possibilities for their future (Alvarez, 2020; Anucha et al., 2017; Barnes, 2019; Gajaria et al., 2021; Jones & Boufard, 2012).

Theme #3: Strengthening Cultural and Community Connections by Creating Access to Opportunities Beyond the Neighbourhood

Responses from participants emphasized the importance of strengthening cultural and community connections and accessing opportunities beyond their immediate neighbourhood as essential to their personal growth and identity development (Chioneso et al., 2020; Ticar & Edwards, 2022; Zarifsanaiey et al., 2022). One participant reflected on the value of these opportunities stating, "It allows us to meet a lot of new people that come with connections and gives us the opportunity to experience real-life scenarios and future opportunities." This insight underscores how experiential

learning activities offered by the program, such as meeting Black mentors, community leaders, and professionals, created pathways for personal and professional development. These activities exposed participants to diverse perspectives and helped them expand their understanding of social and professional networks beyond the confines of their community.

CRT provides a lens to understand the transformative impact of these experiences by emphasizing the need for counter spaces where marginalized individuals can challenge systemic barriers and connect with culturally affirming role models. These counter spaces are vital for fostering cultural pride and empowerment among Black youth, as demonstrated through activities like overnight camps. While one participant described the camp as "super memorable," the significance extended far beyond creating lasting memories. Participants shared how the camps fostered teamwork, facilitated meaningful personal reflection, and cultivated cultural pride. For instance, one participant elaborated, "At camp, we had deep conversations about our cultural backgrounds and how we can support each other as a community. It made me feel connected to my roots in a way that school never does." This example illustrates how the camp served as a counter space where Black youth could engage in meaningful cultural discussions within a supportive environment, deepening their understanding of their heritage while developing interpersonal and leadership skills to better their communities. Furthermore, the camps included guided activities that emphasized cultural traditions, such as storytelling and community-building exercises, which many participants identified as pivotal in strengthening their cultural identity. As one participant noted, "It made me realize the importance of knowing where I come from and using that to motivate myself." These sentiments illustrate how these experiences helped participants reconnect with their heritage and develop a renewed sense of cultural pride and belonging. Through this lens, CRT highlights the critical role of culturally responsive programming in providing opportunities for Black youth to engage with their identities and resist systemic erasure in traditional educational spaces.

The value of these experiences involving taking youth outside of their community lies in providing them with enriching opportunities that are culturally relevant and identity-affirming. Programs like Catharsis offer avenues to explore identity, culture, and personal growth through a variety of activities such as sports, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy workshops. One participant shared that "learning about financial literacy and how to manage money was empowering because we don't get taught that in school. It made me feel like I could really plan for my future." This comment underscores how these programs provide practical skills that are directly relevant to the participants' lives and the challenges they face in their neighbourhood, helping them feel better equipped to navigate personal and community challenges. The transformative impact of the program was evident in how it fostered essential life skills. For example, sports activities were highlighted as important for developing communication skills and accountability. One participant explained, "Engaging in sports taught me how to communicate better with my peers and take responsibility for my actions. That's something I now apply outside of the program, whether at school or home." This quote reinforced the idea that these activities are not only recreational but also formative, in the process teaching critical social skills that youth apply in various aspects of their lives. Additionally, the program's focus on scholarships and entrepreneurial opportunities was empowering for participants. As one participant explained, "The business plan competition helped me develop an idea, pitch it, and think about how to turn it into a real business. Winning the competition showed me that I could really succeed in something I'm passionate about."

Culturally responsive programming empowers youth by giving them the tools and opportunities to pursue their ambitions, whether through post-secondary education or entrepreneurial ventures. The Catharsis program emphasized how students can experience multiple pathways to success and that the process is not always linear. The importance of these experiences goes beyond the individual; they contribute to strengthening cultural connections within the community. Through culturally relevant activities, youth were encouraged to explore their identities, fostering a sense of pride and belonging that supports their overall well-being. For instance, in one weekly activity, participants wrote letters to their future selves and read them a year later, which one participant described as "a powerful way to reflect on how far we've come." This activity helped youth reconnect with their personal and cultural identities, reinforcing the value of self-reflection and cultural pride as part of their growth journey.

Overall, the opportunities provided by Generation Chosen to program participants allowed the youth to celebrate their heritage, fostering a sense of pride and belonging that directly influenced their ability to succeed in a variety of contexts. The transformative experiences provided through culturally responsive programming serve as bridges connecting youth to broader networks, resources, and opportunities. Access to leadership training, financial literacy education, and outdoor camps empowered youth to transcend the limitations imposed by living in low-income and under-resourced communities. These experiences are not just educational but also deeply tied to the participants' cultural identity. By offering culturally relevant experiences, Black youth were able to strengthen their cultural connections and recognize their cultural capital, while simultaneously building life skills necessary for their personal and professional development.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The themes discussed converge through the idea that culturally responsive, trauma-informed programming is a catalyst for holistic growth. Catharsis programming empowers youth by providing them with a strong cultural foundation through culturally responsive curriculum content, staff modeling vulnerability and resilience, access to Black mental health practitioners free of cost, and offering transformative experiential opportunities that extend beyond the neighbourhood where the program participants live. These interconnected elements create a comprehensive support system for Black youth that fosters emotional well-being, cultural pride, and the skills needed to navigate and overcome systemic barriers. The recommendations from the youth, shared via surveys and focus groups, are grounded in these interconnected themes. They call for a more comprehensive, empathetic, and long-term community-oriented approach that addresses the systemic barriers and inequities impacting their community. Below are their recommendations:

1) *Strengthen Cultural Identity through Relevant Curriculum Content*: Implement programs that celebrate and affirm Black cultural identities, providing a foundation for youth to develop a strong sense of pride in their heritage. The youth emphasized how this was lacking as part of their schooling experiences.

2) *Invest in Creating Brave and Safer Spaces:* Ensure that staff are relatable and culturally responsive, both in schools and in after-school and evening programs, modelling vulnerability and resilience to create environments where Black youth feel brave and safer to express themselves, their identities, and the challenges they are experiencing.

3) *Provide Access to Diverse Opportunities:* Provide transformative experiences and experiential opportunities that extend beyond the neighbourhood such as field trips, camps, leadership capacity-building, and financial literacy training which are crucial for personal

and professional development. Costs should be subsidized so the opportunities remain accessible, particularly for youth from single-parent households and lower socio-economic status backgrounds.

4) *Long-Term and Sustainable Government Support and Investment:* Greater government and institutional support are required to fund and sustain culturally responsive initiatives and programs, ensuring they are accessible to all youth, especially those from underserved communities.

These recommendations offered by the Black youth attending Generation Chosen's Catharsis program highlight the need for a holistic approach that integrates cultural identity, emotional support, and access to opportunities, all of which are crucial for empowering Black youth to thrive in the face of systemic challenges. It was clear that the recommendations aimed to break the cycle of blame and deficit thinking projected onto the community and instead championed solutions that aligned with the lived experiences and needs of the youth themselves.

The findings from this study have significant implications for the field of education and schooling, particularly in the context of in-service and pre-service teacher training. The participants' recommendations underscore the need for a more culturally responsive curriculum that goes beyond superficial acknowledgments of Black history. This suggests a broader imperative for educators to integrate diverse cultural narratives and lived experiences into their teaching practices, ensuring that all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. For in-service and pre-service teachers, this means engaging in ongoing professional development focused on cultural competency, anti-racist pedagogy, restorative practices, and trauma-informed and healing approaches. Such training could help educators and other practitioners more effectively understand the unique challenges faced by Black youth and communities and equip them with the tools to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

From the researchers' perspectives, the study highlights the importance of not only addressing the content in the curriculum, but also rethinking the delivery and structure of educational programs pedagogically to accommodate the diverse needs of students and their families, especially those in vulnerable circumstances (e.g., parents who are incarcerated or those who are constantly exposed to gun violence in their neighbourhood). This includes race and gendered dynamics that may influence participation, as well as the time constraints and family responsibilities that can limit access to educational opportunities. The insights gained from this research suggest that schools and education programs could benefit from offering more flexible and accessible programming, such as evening or weekend classes, childcare services, and transportation assistance, to remove barriers to participation for residents in marginalized communities.

While the findings of this study are specific to a particular low-income community in Toronto, the implications go beyond this context. The challenges and needs identified by the Black youth, such as the importance of culturally responsive education, the need for systemic support to address poverty and violence, and the benefits of experiential learning opportunities, are relevant to other regions and organizations offering youth programming. These findings could inform the design and implementation of similar programs in different contexts, encouraging synergetic partnerships where educators and program developers (e.g., schools and non-profits working together) prioritize cultural relevance, accessibility, and community engagement.

Conclusion and Further Areas for Exploration

Many Black youth continue to face systemic challenges stemming from intergenerational trauma, discrimination, and systemic racism, which profoundly impact their mental health and identity development. This study contributes to CRT in a Canadian context by illustrating how culturally responsive programming can serve as a counter space that centers the voices and lived experiences of Black youth, enabling them to navigate these challenges with greater agency and empowerment. CRT's focus on counter-storytelling and its critique of systemic inequities provides a valuable lens for understanding the transformative role of initiatives like Generation Chosen's Catharsis program. By integrating culturally meaningful healing practices such as storytelling, art therapy, and community engagement, the program facilitates emotional healing and promotes positive self-identity development and community engagement (Sangalang et al., 2020). Additionally, such initiatives foster leadership skills, critical thinking, and social skills, empowering youth to be advocates and activists in mitigating systemic issues in their communities.

The findings extend CRT by showing how culturally responsive programming empowers Black youth to disrupt deficit narratives and affirm their cultural identities. The program's focus on building emotional intelligence, fostering leadership skills, and enhancing critical thinking exemplifies CRT's emphasis on creating opportunities for marginalized communities to resist systemic oppression and advocate for systemic change. Participants' experiences demonstrated how these spaces foster resilience and agency, equipping them to challenge inequities in their communities and beyond. This study aligns with and builds on existing CRT research emphasizing the centrality and impact of race in shaping lived experiences and accessing opportunities, by providing concrete examples of how race-conscious, trauma-informed programming can disrupt cycles of systemic marginalization and intergenerational trauma.

While the Catharsis program demonstrated significant positive impacts, several challenges and limitations must be addressed to ensure broader and more equitable participation. Notably, gender disparities in participation suggest a need to reassess program structure and outreach efforts to engage more young women effectively. Additionally, barriers such as time constraints, transportation challenges, and safety concerns related to neighbourhood politics and polarization highlight the importance of flexible programming and targeted support services. These challenges underscore the need for future iterations of culturally responsive programs to be more adaptable to the complex realities of participants' lives.

Future studies should consider more extensive approaches to address multifaceted challenges faced by Black youth. These studies should aim for larger sample sizes and longitudinal research to track student progress and wellbeing over extended periods, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. It is also critical to explore school-community partnerships and synergies that better support Black youth and their families. Additionally, a comparative lens should be applied by conducting studies across various neighbourhoods to identify region-specific dynamics to more intentionally identify disparities in accessing opportunities (e.g., amongst race, socio-economic status, gender, etc.).

Looking ahead, it is crucial to continue developing and advocating for the implementation of more culturally responsive, trauma-informed programming to empower Black youth and promote their emotional well-being, especially within the context of low-income communities similar to the Jane and Finch community. Culturally responsive programming that promotes emotional intelligence, affirms Back youth identities and their culture, and facilitates healing is an

integral approach to empowering these young individuals and meeting their needs, personally and as a community. As a collective, these considerations are vital not only at the local level but also on a national and international scale to develop holistic strategies, programs, and partnerships that authentically support the emotional well-being of Black youth to create, cultivate, and maintain the conditions for them to thrive and achieve to their full potential.

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