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“WHY SHOULD I STAY?” CANADIAN BLACK YOUTH AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Abstract

This study used narrative inquiry and critical approaches to race to explore Black youth perceptions of public libraries and community-based programs. The study was conducted in Ontario with youth aged 13 to 24 and parents of youth. Data was drawn from semi-structured interviews with youth and parents and an arts-based qualitative tool. Libraries were identified as safe and welcoming community spaces. However, youth feel poorly represented and seek youth programs with a race-conscious and inclusive approach. Core recommendations include equitable approaches to representation, strengthening relationships with partner organizations, and addressing performative approaches to inclusion.

Introduction

This study used narrative inquiry and critical approaches to race to explore Black youth perceptions and experiences of public library and community-based youth programs (Clandinin, 2016; James, 2021). The study was conducted in a mid-sized Ontario city with Black youth aged 13 to 24 and parents of youth. Data was drawn from semi-structured interviews and an arts-based qualitative tool. The study aimed to understand why some youth chose community-based services over public libraries and the relationship (if any) to perception(s) of anti-Black racism in education and learning (James, 2021). It also sought to identify programs and services that help Black youth with structural challenges (e.g., anti-Black racism in school) and opportunities for public libraries to support them. Finally, it explored family engagement and decision-making to understand how youth became engaged with program(s) in community and/or public library spaces. Libraries were identified as safe and welcoming community spaces. However, youth feel their cultures, identities, and histories are poorly represented in public libraries. They often seek programs that feature a race-conscious and inclusive approach and help them address structural barriers. Community-based approaches have strong possibilities for public libraries. Core recommendations include equitable approaches to representation, strengthening relationships with partner organizations, and addressing performative approaches to inclusion. Longer-term attention to persistent structural issues and meaningful consultation is also recommended.

Theoretical Framework

Despite the rich relationship between humans and stories, it is only in recent decades that narrative research has emerged as a methodological approach to describing and understanding our relationship to experiences and each other (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2020). Building from the tenet that “stories are a way of knowing” or, more explicitly, that *lived experience is knowledge*, Seidman contends that stories provide a view into the “meaning-making experience” (2013, p. 7) because stories elicit and retell the personal and external narratives that “have had the most influence” on individuals and their lives (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 2). By telling the stories of lived experience, Critical Race Theory (CRT) also holds that counter-stories are an important tool to give voice to perspectives often overlooked in dominant narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). When used in concert with anti-racism principles of reflective analyses of power and privilege (Dei, 2014), CRT is a highly useful tool to locate and contextualize racial oppression institutionally and in larger political, social, and economic environments (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Both frameworks aim to examine and contest structural forces rather than merely respond to the causal effects (Dei, 2014) – a point critical LIS scholars have repeatedly made in their critique of aspirational LIS discourses (Espinal, 2001; Espinal, Sutherland, & Roh, 2018; Gibson et al., 2021; Leung & López-McKnight, 2021; Ossom-Williamson et al., 2020).

Study Design/Methodology

The study had two groups of participants – Black youth and parents of Black youth (hereafter called youth).¹ The study was conducted in a mid-sized Ontario city with youth aged 13 to 24 who self-identified as Black or more than one race with African heritage and had used a community-based program in the two years prior to the study. Youth did not need to have used a public library to participate. Youth and their parent/s did not need to both participate. Data was drawn from semi-structured interviews. An arts-based tool, Personal Meaning Mapping (PMM), was used with youth. Data was collected between September 2022 and September 2023.

The goals of the study were threefold:

- a. better understand why youth chose community-based services over public libraries and the relationship (if any) to perception(s) of anti-Black racism in education and learning,
- b. identify programs and services that help youth with structural challenges (e.g., anti-Black racism in school) and opportunities for public libraries to support them, and
- c. explore family engagement and decision-making to understand better how youth became engaged in community and/or public library program(s).

Black communities have faced substantial trauma due to their participation in some academic research (Jean-Pierre & James, 2020). This study adopted an ethically rigorous and best practice-based approach (Schelbe et al., 2015) to constructing a sample that included *only*

¹ In the study design and institutional ethics application, “caregivers” was used to recognize that youth may be cared for by another responsible adult (e.g., grandparent, aunt, foster parent, etc.). In the final study sample, all of the caregivers were parents. As such, this description reflects and describes the research population most accurately.

the number of participants needed based on the criteria of the information richness of individuals with lived experience (Patton, 2015) and theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). The study also used a community-based research approach in consultation with the WEAN Black Community Centre. Community-based research is guided by a commitment to community participation and input in study design and outcomes to the greatest extent possible (Caine & Mill, 2016). Figure 1 provides an overview of the community consultation process.

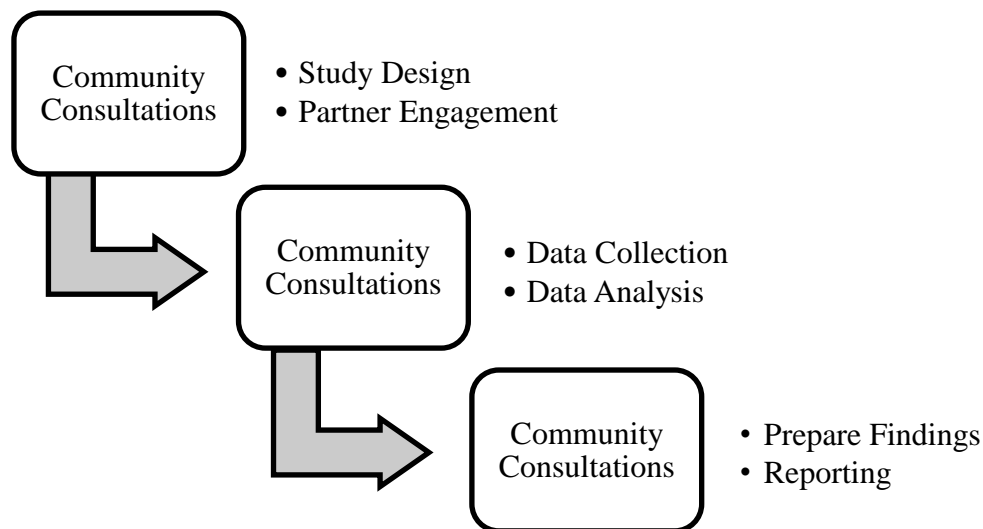


Figure 1: Community Consultation Process

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 participants: 14 youths and seven parents. The interview guide for youth focused on their past and current use of public library programs, their past and current use of non-library community-based programs, their perception of how programs do or do not meet their needs, and how they could better respond to their challenges. Parent interviews examined family engagement in learning programs, gaps parents perceived in programs for Black youth, and benefits observed from youth participation in library or community-based programs. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted about 60 minutes.

PMM is a qualitative arts-based tool developed for informal learning settings (e.g., museums, libraries, etc.) (Falk et al., 1998). This is the first known use of the method in a Canadian public library study. Similar studies have gauged youth's understanding of complex topics (Shaby et al., 2019), their perceived learning outcomes (Faria et al., 2020), and their perceptions of their inclusion (Dawson, 2014). In the exercise, youth were asked to create a PMM using the words “public library programs” and “community-based programs.” Instructions were read and available during the exercise. They were given coloured markers, sheets marked with each word, and blank sheets. Each PMM exercise took approximately 30 minutes.

The study received approval from Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board in December 2021. Participants received a Letter of Information (LOI) with a study synopsis and participation criteria. There were three LOIs depending on the youth's age and one

for parents. Participants were offered an opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms. In cases where they did not select their own, a pseudonym was assigned to them. Youth received a \$15 gift card for participating in an interview and/or PMM exercise. This was paid for by a grant from the Ontario Library Association's Research and Continuing Education Fund.

Data analysis began as data was collected and was followed by rigorous reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Each transcript and/or PMM drawing was reviewed by a single researcher who applied inductive codes to the second and third readings. The researcher then reviewed codes, identified broad themes, and referred to the original text to ensure that the selected theme/s best represented the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). All data was re-verified in NVivo using quantitative data verification and information visualization tools before the final themes were compiled and written up (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Community member-checking was then completed with older youths and parents (Caine & Mill, 2016).

Findings

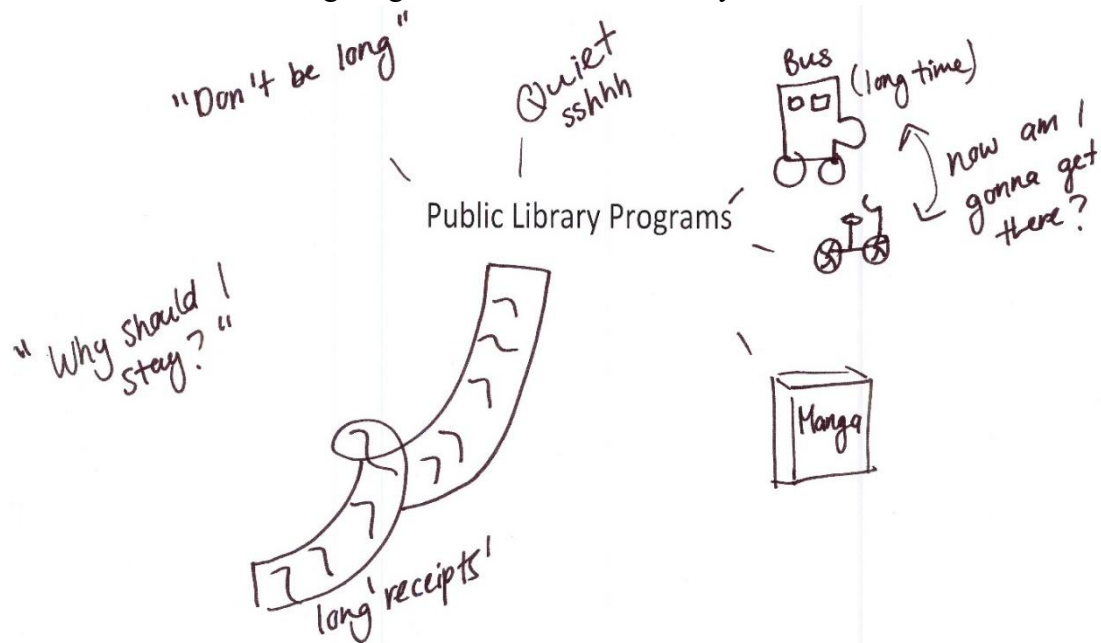
The following section explores the core themes from youth and parent responses. However, it is important to underscore that the purpose of comparing experiences in library and community-based spaces emerged from the recognition that many programs (e.g., reading, English as a second language, book clubs, homework help, etc.) can often be found in both spaces. Thus, the point in comparing programs was not to vilify or shame public libraries. Instead, the goal was to identify what engages youth and better learn how to serve their needs from their perspective.

Theme 1: Early memories of libraries are positive with connections to childhood and family

Public libraries were identified as safe and welcoming community spaces that remind youth of positive childhood experiences and relationships with loved ones (e.g., parents, grandparents, and siblings). Jake (16, male), an above-average library user, explained, "I feel like with the library, it was more because when I was very young, my Mom used to read to me like she would read like chapter books to me... So since then, it's kind of been ingrained." However, they often lack formal connections to libraries and disengage when their offerings become less relevant. Aleia (20, female), a former library user, noted this in her PMM when she wrote, "Why should I stay?" and seemed confused about other library uses in her description after the exercise.

Every I think it was two weeks or three weeks, my parents would take us to like the library and they'd be like, "okay, go pick up books", right? And we'd just like grab as many as we could and come home and read like comics and manga or whatever. And we'd always try to like compete me and my brother to see who had the longest like receipt, I guess for like the books we took out and like he always won...but I guess I kind of just stuck to black just because like

besides, like the manga, I guess like there wasn't any like colourful like



memories or experiences associated with the libraries I went to.

Theme 2: Representation and a sense of belonging are core issues for youth

For youth, representation is notably a strong desire to feel represented and a challenge experienced in public libraries. Jeremy's (24, male) description captures these mixed feelings.

A lot of Black [youths] want to see themselves in books or to see themselves in movies or to see themselves in things like the library promotes, which they don't yet. And I use the word 'yet' very critically because there's potential, but it's not like a negative space just a not totally positive space.

Youth also experience interpersonal and systemic racism in ways that impact their comfort in

Figure 2: Aleia, Public Library Programs, Personal Meaning Map

public spaces. This is not necessarily related to experiences in/with a library. The Radical Black

Woman (23, female) had never been to a public library before and still expressed fear of anti-Black racism in the space, “It’s so sad, but I think as a Black person you naturally think “I hope no one thinks I am coming in here to make trouble,” she shared. On the other hand, Tia (16, female) pointedly called attention to her anti-Black experiences in the library she used daily.

Public library.

- Free internet
- Unnecessary gloves.
- Away from reality.

Figure 3: Tia, Public Library Programs, Personal Meaning Map

The representation of Black cultures, histories, and identities during Black History Month was a critical equity issue. Many felt their identities and cultures are performatively displayed “only in February, naturally,” as Jeremy sarcastically remarked. In the context of public libraries and materials, The Radical Black Woman also aptly asked, ‘you can’t judge a book by its cover, but if I don’t see the cover looking like me the majority of the time, is it really for me, you know?’

Theme 3: Importance of Black peer group, professionals, and community mentors

Education and learning programs that create opportunities to be with Black peers, professionals, and community mentors are highly desirable to youth and parents. Describing his *Black Boys Coding* program, Jay (16, male) highlighted his connection to leaders with his lived experience

Like their passion to get things done, even if people look down on them, they still fight through it and that like because of their race and all that. But yeah, I really liked that and it gave me like motivation and confidence that they’re willing to do anything to be successful. ... Because like they were coding, you can make a future out of that.

Black people (variously described as “people who look like them”) working or using a space encourages youth to engage more. Youth are also drawn to programs with leaders that display genuine concern, care, and interest in them. They highly value these relationships and identify

positive connections to leaders as a driving force in whether they return to a program. This is shown in Aleia's now colourful community-based programs PMM, where she used a running track to depict her family, youth leaders, and Black mentors circling her with love and support.

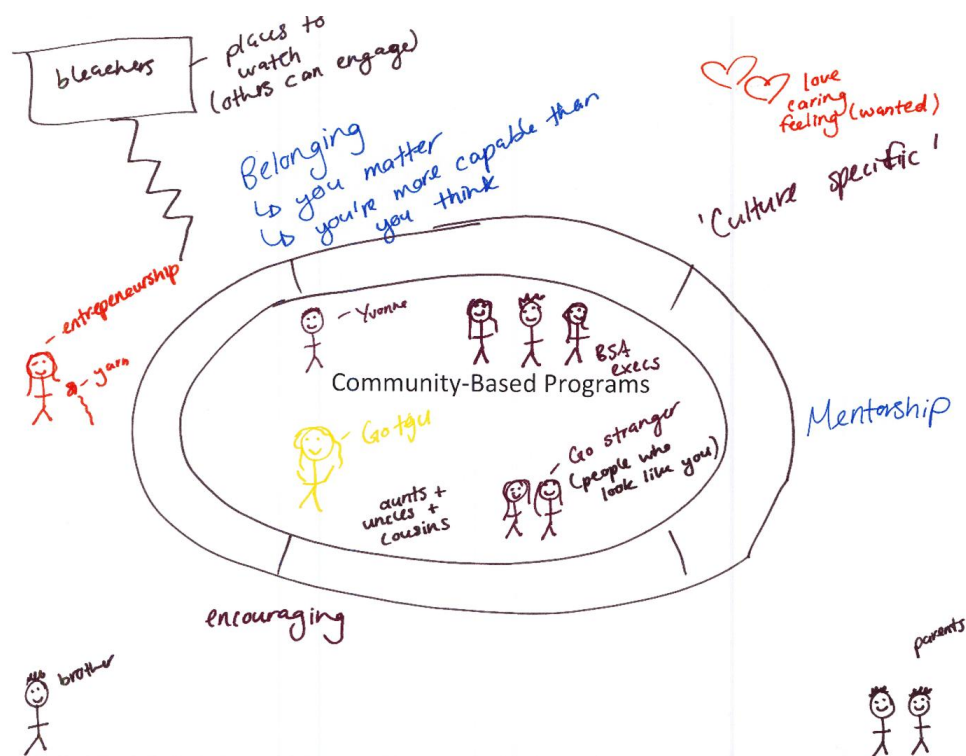


Figure 4: Aleia, Community-Based Programs, Personal Meaning Map

Theme 4: Public libraries lack community and culturally specific information and resources

Public libraries are highly trusted for general information (e.g., cooking, how-to, etc.). Still, there is a strong perception that they lack Black community and culturally specific information and resources. Amani, an occasional public library worker and mother of a 16-year-old son, surprisingly shared, “I just don't find it useful. It's not, it's not, and even for like <son>. I got him a library card, and he's just like nah...there's nothing there for him that he finds interesting.”

Parents noted there are not enough materials with Black children and youth, resources on navigating structural barriers (e.g., anti-Black racism), or those from a multitude of Black cultural contexts. Cassandra shared about trying to find materials during a difficult time

We weren't finding any books for him... I was looking for books that would help my son to develop as a young Black boy. But I couldn't find anything like that, unfortunately. And so, we would just get what we could get. I knew what I was looking for, though, and I found them online.

Parents often use the internet and recommendations from other parents to find materials for children and young adults that feature diverse characters and storylines. As Rachel strongly emphasized, “We did a lot of buying and gifting them books that were from authors and had like that representation. A lot of those books I bought. I did not get that from the library.”

Theme 5: Parents (and older youth) seek representation and belonging too

Parents specifically seek programs where children can “see” themselves and connect with other Black children and youth. They often rely on “asking around” when choosing extra-curricular opportunities. Ivette explained, “I speak to friends, I go to church. I know lots of mothers who are Black, right?” A crucial decision-making factor is the experience of other youth and families and the organizational reflection of Black communities. As Caroline cogently summarized, “When I think of the public library, I think of white. I just do”. While she clarified, “I never had a negative experience, but I just didn’t see it as a place that would suit them.” Other parents more overtly shared that their children would learn harmful behaviours like “second-guessing” themselves or their culture. Ivette shared this concern through a personal experience

There’s been times when my kids have come back...and they’re like ‘oh Mommy, I want my hair to be like Rapunzel’ and I’m like ‘your hair can never be like Rapunzel, but it’s just as beautiful. It’s even more beautiful.’ It’s just having to do that convincing thing of making them feel they are also worth it.

Older youth also look to their community for race-conscious and identity-affirming opportunities for learning. Technologically inclined, Trevor (23, male) was a regular frequenter of libraries as a younger youth. “I would have to go alone because nobody really wants to go to the library,” he shared. In contrast, his community-based program PMM highlights a strong sense of connection, belonging, and purpose in his volunteer role as a *Black Boys Coding* peer leader, “I guess it’s like the community. That’s what I get from it, really. When I get to see all those people there.”

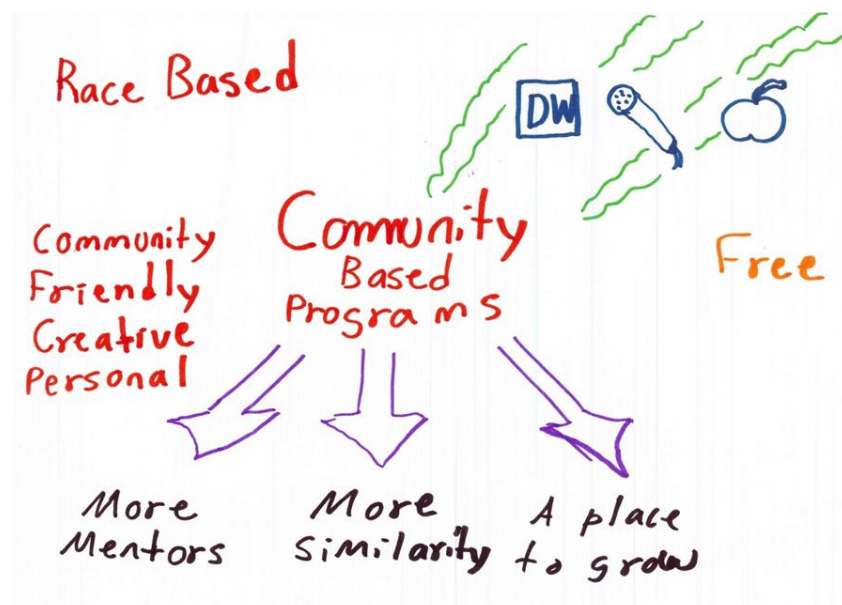


Figure 5: Trevor, Community-Based Programs, Personal Meaning Map

Discussion

Public libraries have significant opportunities to adopt programmatic and institutional approaches to improve the representation of Black identities, cultures, and histories. It is also important to note that lack of representation is more consequential than merely not carrying or offering materials. Despite their positive early memories, their more significant experiences with representation (or lack thereof) impact their sense of belonging and whether they view public libraries as enriching spaces. However, their expectations of representation and belonging are more complex and nuanced than simply materials or bodies in a space. As Rachel aptly described it, “Not just a right to be there, but a sense of belonging. Like, ‘Oh, this is a place where we are welcome and can see ourselves reflected in the people or the activities or the books.’”

Though youth and parents identified where libraries could improve to be more inclusive, it is also worth reminding that both youth and parents held a positive outlook and especially noted a strong potential to build community connections. Thus, public libraries also have opportunities to enhance relationships with Black-led organizations that offer culturally specific programs and mentoring to Black youth. In fact, parents and youth are eager for the kinds of programs and experiences that other youth feel in normative spaces. To be successful, programs should be community-led in design, approach, and messaging to Black youth and communities.

Considering the cumulative impact of anti-Black narratives across their life experiences, it is unsurprising that both youth and parents adopt a more critical perspective on the current inclusion of Black cultures and histories in public libraries and other educational spaces. Public libraries should begin by centring the perspective of those most impacted to carefully examine how their current approaches fall short in practice for Black communities. For many, this perceived oversight signals a lack of appreciation of the substantial roots and reach of anti-Black racism in Canada. Moreover, piecemeal responses (e.g., Black History Month) neglect to address the lack of safety that Black youth feel or the harmful messages of cultural normativity. A point made strikingly clear by 16-year-old Jake, who wisely remarked, “It's like virtue signaling, where they're excessively like, don't worry like Black Lives Matter. We stand with Black culture. We're allies.” Well, that's good, of course, but at some point, it can feel kind of fake.”

Conclusion

This study explored Black youth's perceptions of public libraries and community-based programs using narrative inquiry and critical approaches to race. This research substantively contributes to the gap in Canadian LIS studies that examine equitable and inclusive service to Black youth or

identify their perceptions or experiences in public libraries. It also complements community-based research in Canadian public libraries that demonstrates the success of the community-led librarianship model (CFLA-FCAB, 2017, Working Together Project, 2008). This approach to community-based research in LIS can be applied in a breadth of contexts to examine broader challenges with belonging and representation in public libraries. There are also opportunities for the Canadian library sector to meaningfully consider how many of the themes (lack of representation, lack of belonging, performative inclusion, etc.) are experienced in other contexts.

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