RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Community School Initiative in Toronto: Mitigating Opportunity Gaps in the Jane and Finch Community in the Wake of COVID-19

by Ardavan Eizadirad, Sally Abudiab, and Brice Baartman

ALL WE HAVE IS EACH OTHER, N.O. BONZO, JUSTSEEDS.ORG

Introduction: COVID-19 and Educational Disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing systemic inequities and presented new hardships for marginalized communities and families associated with loss of income, lack of access to social support services, increased care responsibilities, and greater likelihood of contracting COVID-19 (Choi et al., 2020; Eizadirad & Sider, 2020; Goodyear, 2021; Royal Society of Canada, 2021; Yang et al., 2020). The pandemic significantly impacted the delivery of education, with widespread disruptions in schools and communities, particularly disadvantaging racialized low-income families who have less access to resources and support services (Colour of Poverty, 2019; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Eizadirad, 2019,2020; James, 2020; Toronto Foundation, 2021; United Way, 2019; Williams et al. 2013). Due to school closures and abrupt transitions to remote learning, opportunity and achievement gaps further intensified (Bonal & Gonzalez, 2020; James, 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; People for Education, 2021).

The prolonged nature of COVID-19-related school lockdowns and community restrictions not only impacted students' ability to attend schools but consequentially led to reductions in accessing co-curricular opportunities and supplemental education programs (SEPs), with a 90% decline in sports offered in schools (Ekeh & Okeke, 2019; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; People for Education, 2021; Royal Society of Canada, 2021; Toronto Foundation, 2021). A SEP can be described as "a combination of academic training with unconventional methods (e.g., sports, games, arts, discussions) in an organized program to increase the number of positive academic outcomes among students relative to negative ones" (Ekeh & Okeke, 2019, p. 5). For marginalized students living in low-income racialized neighborhoods, evidence has shown that SEPs act as complementary academic training that improves outcomes in student's mental health, well-being, and overall academic achievement (Ekeh & Okeke, 2019; Royal Society of Canada, 2021).

Since the onset of the pandemic there have been increased demands for social services that far exceed the capacity of organizations to meet such demands (Toronto Foundation, 2021). Our research project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada with the objective of exploring how community-based programming can be adapted and mobilized during the pandemic to mitigate opportunity and achievement gaps for Black, Indigenous, people of colour (BIPOC), and families from lower socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in the Jane and Finch community in Toronto, Canada. The Jane and Finch community is one of Canada's most under-resourced neighborhoods. This is timely and important as it provides race-based data within a Canadian context to fill the gap in the literature about the impact of COVID-19 on achievement in racialized under-resourced communities. Just as importantly, we discuss the significance of how the research was conducted in the wake of COVID-19. Hence, this article is about the findings from the data, but just as much about the community-driven approach for how the research was conducted, by the community and for the community in the midst of the pandemic. Our research methodology and approach in doing community-based research demonstrates the importance of not only "serving" marginalized communities but collaborating with the community to guide the research process to ensure multiple perspectives and lived experiences are valued and heard.

What is the Community School Initiative (CSI)?

The research project involved examination of the efficacy of an evening and weekend supplementary academic program called the *Community School Initiative* (CSI) offered to residents of the Jane and Finch community in Toronto, Canada. CSI is a partnership between the non-profit organization Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE, 2022; learn more at https://yaaace.com/) and the for-profit enterprise Spirit of Math (Spirit of Math, 2022; learn more at https://spiritofmath.com/). It delivered a structured math curriculum to students in grades two to eight aged 8 to 14 years old from September 2020 to May 2021 at a subsidized cost supported by a team of caring adults, including teachers, coaches, parents, and volunteers. Spirit of Math has been operating for 35 years and typically offers their structured math curriculum to high-performing and gifted students in kindergarten to Grade 11 as a private service. They serve over 11,000 students across 40 campuses in twenty cities in North America and Pakistan. The foundation of the Spirit of Math curriculum is based on four elements: drills, problem solving, core curriculum, and cooperative learning. These elements as a collective create a multi-layered experiential learning experience that aims to develop well-rounded students.

CSI was offered as a 9-month (36 weeks) program. The cost of the program was subsidized at $100 per person, so families got access to it at a fraction of what it typically costs ($3000) as a private sector service. CSI began with in-person programming, moved to remote delivery due to COVID-19 restrictions in alignment with public health guidelines, and transitioned to a hybrid model to support families and their various circumstances. YAAACE students had access to the Spirit of Math curriculum with slight adjustments. Students attended the weekend learning session on Saturdays for 2 hours followed with a 1-hour remote weeknight drop-in session to get extra help. Students were assigned to a grade based on their skills and knowledge identified via diagnostic testing. Some older students were placed in lower grades based on their diagnostic assessment which showed they were behind in some of their foundational math skills for their age. YAAACE teachers were trained and supported by Spirit of Math instructors to deliver the curriculum. Bi-weekly check-in meetings were hosted between YAAACE teachers and Spirit of Math staff to discuss identified challenges and how to support students. Students were assessed weekly through homework assignments, math drills, tests, and a final exam.

Approximately 100 students participated in the CSI including 5 staff from Spirit of Math, 8 Ontario certified

teachers, 8 YAAACE coaches, and other staff hired by YAAACE to be part of the student support team. The support team would assist teachers in their classroom. It is important to note that many of the staff had direct community connections with families in the program. BIPOC educators were hired to represent the cultural identities of the students. YAAACE typically hires the same small group of educators to deliver its educational programs throughout the year such as the March Break camp and the Summer Institute to create continuity of care and establish trust with students and families. Coaches served as mentors as part of the program working collaboratively with the teachers to keep students accountable, motivate them, and facilitate transfer of life skills from the classroom to sports and the larger community. Overall, CSI aimed to minimize the achievement gap by creating access to academic opportunities that are accessible, affordable, and socio-culturally relevant, sustaining, and responsive with consideration for systemic barriers impacting community members living in the Jane and Finch neighborhood.

Distinction between the Achievement Gap and the Opportunity Gap

It is important to distinguish between what are referred to as the achievement gap and the opportunity gap. In the education sector, the "achievement gap" often refers to "[D]isparity in academic performance between groups of students. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates, among other [outcome-based] success measures" (Ansell, 2011, para. 1). Reference to these outcome-based statistics, particularly differences in achievement between various social groups, are used by policymakers and other educational stakeholders to assess and judge the quality of education offered by schools, communities, regions, or countries. In response to these disparities, educational reforms are proposed to mitigate achievement gaps – reforms such as greater investments in standardized testing as an accountability tool, which only promotes and reinforces a neoliberal market driven model of education (Au, 2016; Eizadirad, 2019; Eizadirad & Portelli, 2018; Kempf, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006). For our purposes, we refer to the achievement gap as the difference in achievement outcomes between identities and communities in dominant positions of society compared to those minoritized along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, religion, income, ability, and other factors. The emphasis is on outcome-based results, yet as Carter and Welner (2013) emphasize, "While these assessments [and by extension achievement gaps] attempt to determine where students are, they ignore how they may have gotten there" (p. 3).

In contrast, the opportunity gap as defined by Gorski (2018) involves "the troubling ways youth experiencing poverty are denied the educational opportunities more likely granted to more affluent youth" (p. 101). This is process-oriented rather than outcome-based. For our purposes, we expand on Gorski's (2018) definition in alignment with the works of Shah (2018), Schlueter (2021), Carter and Welner (2013), and Williams et al. (2013) to include all minoritized identities who are exposed to a magnitude of systemic inequities and their intersections. We define the opportunity gap as the intersection of systemic inequities that create barriers for minoritized identities and communities to access and secure opportunities to achieve their full potential. Similar to the achievement gap, the opportunity gap can be compared in terms of individuals, schools, neighborhoods, regions, or countries. Our analysis prioritizes a neighborhood level analysis focusing on the Jane and Finch community as a case study. Gorski (2018) outlines various "dimensions of the educational opportunity gap" (p. 103), which is helpful to analyze disparities in opportunities amongst schools in different neighborhoods. 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. Whereas the achievement gap examines outcomes on tests as the barometer for identifying the magnitude of inequities in education, the opportunity gap provides a more holistic community lens going beyond the individual realm to explore the systemic inequities that serve as barriers impacting student achievement in schools across different social groups. This community lens approach should be prioritized given that "educational disparities and intergenerational economic inequality are highly correlated with skin color, ethnicity, linguistic and social class status" (Carter & Welner, 2013, p. 1).

Under a neoliberal education model, student achievements across social groups are often judged and compared via standardized test results (Au, 2010; Kempf, 2016). Although theoretically standardized tests are implemented to help identify inequities in the education system and areas for improvement (Volante, 2007), this has not led to significantly closing the achievement gap along the lines of race and socioeconomic since its introduction in the United States and Canada (Au, 2010; Dei, 2008, Eizadirad, 2018; James, 2012; Kempf, 2016). As Wayne Au (2010) critically asks in his book titled *Unequal by Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality*,

> The historical roots of high-stakes, standardised testing in racism, nativism, and eugenics raises a critical question: why is it that, now over 100 years after the first standardised tests were administered in the United States [and by extension in Canada], we have virtually the same test-based achievement gaps along the lines of race and economic class? (p. 12)

Although the context is different to a certain degree between how standardized tests are implemented in Canada in comparison with the United States (EQAO, 2015), the outcome of racialized students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds doing more poorly relative to their white counterparts in education remains a persistent pattern in both countries (Colour of Poverty, 2019). As Nezavdal (2003) reminds us, standardized assessments are "a social construct" (p. 69) that contributes to increasing the opportunity gap where "norms [in standardized testing] are not incidentally held but deliberately upheld to stream students to propel some forward while systematically impeding others" (p. 67).

YAAACE's Social Inclusion Framework for Mitigating the Opportunity Gap

YAAACE uses a Social Inclusion Framework as an operational framework for implementation of its programs and services to mitigate the opportunity gap impacting students and families living in the Jane and Finch community.

The Social Inclusion Framework has six components focusing on a range of services to mitigate the root causes of systemic inequities with a large focus on creating access to opportunities in a manner that is affordable, accessible, and socio-culturally relevant to the needs of the families living in the community. YAAACE acknowledges that negative pull factors in the community such as exposure to violence, guns, and gangs gravitate children and youth towards a lifestyle affiliated with risk-taking and poor decision-making (McMurtry & Curling, 2008). In response, the Social Inclusion strategy seeks to mitigate risk factors in the community by surrounding children and youth with access to quality programming to offset exposure to negative pull factors.

The Social Inclusion team works with the various stakeholders to identify the most volatile cohort of students to ensure that they have access to academic support, recreational programming, expanded opportunities, comprehensive wraparound support, and cultural considerations of care and reflective services year-round. The idea is to ensure students have access to a caring adult, whether a teacher, coach, or mentor, at all times in a 24-hour cycle, particularly outside of school hours on weekday evenings and weekends, where there are greater risks for exposure to violence and other risk factors. The partnerships YAAACE has created and cultivated with various stakeholders over the years, such as with the Ministry of Education, City of Toronto, Public Safety Canada, Toronto Catholic District School Board, and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), contribute to ensuring that the cost to their programs and services are minimal so opportunities remain accessible and affordable to the community members.

YAAACE seeks to engage students and families in the Jane and Finch neighborhood through socio-culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining year-round programming in academics, athletics, recreation, technology, and the arts (see Eizadirad, 2020 for a more in-depth history of YAAACE). Since its inception in 2007, YAAACE has created synergetic collaborative partnerships with various stakeholders to facilitate the growth of the organization and expand its programs and services. These partnerships focus on addressing the systemic barriers and the external factors impacting the achievement of students in the community, particularly for racialized low-income students. This is significant given that racialized students and other minoritized identities are further disadvantaged due to inequities in schools affiliated with streaming, push-outs, lack of representation, and neoliberal policies and practices proclaiming neutrality and colorblindness (Ahmed, 2021; Au, 2016; Battiste, 2013; Colour of Poverty, 2019; Eizadirad, 2019; Eizadirad & Campbell, 2021; James, 2020; Schlueter, 2021; Shah, 2018; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; United Way, 2019). Overall, the CSI provides alternative academic support for BIPOC students after school and on weekends to improve their math skills guided by the curriculum, resources, and pedagogies provided by Spirit of Math.

The Jane and Finch Community in Toronto and the Opportunity Gap

Canada is a country with a population of approximately 39,137,232 as of October 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2022) and consists of 10 provinces and 3 territories. Ontario is Canada's largest province, and it "represents approximately one-third of the nation's population" (Pinto, 2016, p. 96). In Canada, there is no federal department of education. Instead, each province and territory has its own exclusive legal jurisdiction over educational policies and practices (Volante, 2007). Educational policies for governance are established at the provincial level and communicated to local school boards.

YAAACE operates out of different schools in the Jane and Finch neighborhood. From a historical spatial lens looking at the growth of the neighborhood over time, Jane and Finch underwent massive development by the Ontario Housing Commission in the 1960s to keep up with rapid rates of newcomers entering Canada (Narain, 2012). Jane and Finch represented an ideal community for many new immigrants due to low rent costs and relatively close proximity to the downtown core of the city. At the time, immigrants that were moving into the community were predominantly from the West Indies, Asia, Africa, South America, and the Indian subcontinent (Richardson, 2008). High-rise apartments and townhouses were built at a rapid rate without much thought about how to cultivate a sense of community amongst residents. This linear style of hollow urban planning, without much thought to the internal infrastructure of the neighborhood, led to the population of Jane and Finch expanding from 1,301 in 1961 to 33,030 in 1971, which included establishment of 21 high-rise apartment buildings in the neighborhood (Rigakos et al., 2004). Jane and Finch continued its exponential growth in the 1970s and 1980s with the majority of its residents being working-class immigrants and visible minorities (see Eizadirad, 2017 for an in-depth history of the Jane and Finch neighborhood). More recently, Toronto's northwest cluster of neighborhoods, including Jane and Finch, experienced higher rates of COVID-19 in comparison to other neighborhoods in Toronto (Choi et al. 2020; Goodyear, 2021).

Focusing on differences in educational outcomes amongst social groups and communities, the Learning Opportunity Index (LOI) created by the TDSB ranks schools based on external community challenges affecting student achievement (Toronto District School Board, 2020). The school rankings are updated every three years with the latest one being published in 2020. The LOI was created to acknowledge that learning outcomes differ in relation to the communities where schools are located, and to ensure schools facing greater external challenges receive more supports and resources. The LOI school rankings are calculated based on six variables, which include:

1. median family income

2. percentage of families whose income is below the low-income measure

3. percentage of families receiving social assistance

4. adults with low education

5. adults with university degrees

6. single-parent families.

Overall, Jane and Finch accommodates more youth, single-parent families, refugees, individuals without a secondary-school diploma, low-income households, and public housing tenants than any other neighborhood in Toronto (Ahmadi, 2018; Williams et al., 2013).

Another mainstream popular tool that ranks schools is the Fraser Institute (Fraser Institute, 2022; https://www.compareschoolrankings.org/). It ranks schools using publicly available data on achievement exclusively based on results from standardized tests. Many schools in the Jane and Finch community are ranked high on the LOI (needing more resources relative to student and community needs) and low on the Fraser Institute's school rankings (poor performance on provincial standardized tests). The Fraser Institute school rankings have gained so much currency in the public realm that they impact prices of homes around schools (Eizadirad, 2019). The rankings contribute to schools located in racialized communities being labelled as "bad" and viewed through a deficit lens, where the assumption is made that they do not offer quality education. Furthermore, the rankings do not shed light on existing opportunity gaps and how it influences achievement. The deficit thinking about "low-achieving" schools in racialized neighborhoods is further perpetuated through the media, where the social problems impacting the community are often blamed on its residents via neoliberal discourses affiliated with meritocracy and colorblindness without much discussion about systemic inequities impacting student achievement (Ahmadi, 2018; Eizadirad, 2017; Eizadirad & Portelli, 2018; James, 2012; Shah, 2018).

Community-Driven Research Methodology

The objective of this research project was to explore how community-based programming can be mobilized during the COVID-19 pandemic to close the opportunity gap as it impacts BIPOC and families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Youth and parent advisors along with partner organizations were part of regular bi-weekly check-in meetings to guide the research process. They facilitated capturing the perspective of community members most adversely impacted by a neoliberal model of education. The meetings were conducted remotely via Zoom to make them more accessible. All the stakeholders were part of discussions and decision-making about how to collect the data and share the information in manner that is accessible to the community. It was agreed that survey and focus groups would be good at complementing one another for data collection purposes. We also decided to start a research blog immediately to share the vision for the project with the community (communityschoolinitiative.com). Instead of waiting till the project findings were complete, our goal was to take the community with us at every step of the research process. We used the research blog platform to compile and share literature reviews and resources targeting various stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, community partners, and policymakers. Youth and parent advisors emphasized the importance of making information available in formats that are accessible to the community and non-academics. In response, we created various infographics and posted them on the website periodically to make the information accessible in community-oriented language.

Once the research team outlined the survey and focus group questions, they were presented to the decision-making committee that included student and parent advisors. Based on their feedback, some questions were

removed or revised, and some new questions added. It was estimated that surveys would take approximately 20 minutes to be completed. Surveys were administered online via Qualtrics, a secure data collection website. They were completed anonymously and included a combination of open-ended and Likert scale questions. Questions captured demographic data about participants and information about their experiences in the CSI in different roles as students, parents, or teachers. Participants were recruited via a master-list that YAAACE used to communicate with parents, students, and teachers. 33 students, 33 parents, and 4 teachers completed the surveys. A 90-minute focus group was also conducted with all seven teachers delivering the curriculum in the CSI. A $30 Amazon gift card was provided to those who participated as a token of appreciation for their time. The decision-making committee advocated for Amazon gift cards, identifying them as practical given the pandemic conditions and the needs of the families in the community.

All data was collected between June to July 2021 upon completion of the CSI program. Responses were examined using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a paradigm and thematic analysis as a methodology (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). CRT, which has been banned in some states in the United States, provides a framework to examine how racism operates through policies and processes embedded within the social fabric of institutions proclaimed as "neutral" and "colorblind" from a neoliberal lens that glorifies meritocracy, individualism, and competition associated with a survival of the fittest mentality (Au, 2016; Lopez, 2003; Tett & Hamilton, 2021). CRT provides a framework to critically examine who is privileged and advantaged by the conditions of the norm and who is left out and disadvantaged (Ahmed, 2021; James, 2020; Gorski, 2018; Eizadirad & Campbell, 2021). This involves an examination beyond the individual realm to community factors impacting teaching and learning conditions and access to opportunities outside of school hours. The narratives expressed by the participants in the CSI, who live in the Jane and Finch community, helped identify inequities that serve as barriers to student achievement, impeding their progress to achieve to their full potential. Through thematic analysis, we developed five interrelated themes, which included: *holistic and culturally relevant programming, structured programming, communication and parental engagement, digital divide and inequality,* and *effective pedagogies*.

Discussion: Closing the Achievement Gap by Mitigating Systemic Inequities in the Community that Create Barriers for Student Achievement

The majority of the survey respondents self-identified as racialized being Black and African Caribbean, with some representation from the Philippines and Somalia, and some being mixed-race. Over 45% (n=15) of the parents who responded to the survey were in single-parent households making less than $50,000 annually as a family. 58% (n=17) of respondents indicated renting or living in subsidized housing. Common responses for the highest level of

education completed were a college diploma (51%) followed by an undergraduate degree (21%). All seven educators teaching in the CSI were racialized, with a teaching experience range of two to fifteen years in delivery of YAAACE programs and services.

The CSI provided a structured math curriculum to participants in the program. Each student was placed in a grade based on diagnostic assessments and provided an individualized binder to keep track of their progress. As one teacher expressed, "It's nice to have the lessons beforehand, step by step, structured, detailed with different manuals and books, drills set up, and problem of day and the week provided." This allowed teachers to spend less time preparing lessons and more time supporting students. Teachers also expressed that the consistency in the structure of the program helped identify struggling students who needed additional supports. Parents echoed similar sentiments about the structure and consistency in the curriculum being a positive aspect of the program. One parent stated, "Accountability. responsibility, ownership, pride, confidence all developed from program consistency." Teachers further emphasized that the technologies and resources made available to the students as part of the program were very helpful, such as the use of "iPads, AppleTV, laptops, and applications such as Brightspace, Microsoft Teams, and ActiveInspire." These were resources that many of the students may not have had access to or weren't able to afford if it was not for the subsidized cost of the program. Recognizing that similar programs exist but at a much higher price, one parent expressed gratitude stating, "Programs outside of YAAACE do not fit the budget."

"Closing the achievement gap" as an outcome has become a popular buzz word among educational policymakers and politicians when discussing inequities impacting various social groups, yet what is often silenced or not talked about are the opportunity gaps, which lead to achievement gaps as outcomes. These opportunity gaps were further intensified and exposed by COVID-19, reflecting the findings from our study. Examining the state of Ontario schools in the early 1990s, Curtis et al. (1992) outline that, "Working-class kids always have, on average, lower reading sores, higher grade failures, higher drop-out rates and much poorer employment opportunities" (p. 7). This trend continues to exist today largely due to inequality of opportunity rooted in systemic inequities. Race is a significant factor that impacts one's access to opportunities, particularly when systemic discrimination is embedded within the fabric of institutional policies and practices. Within the TDSB, "schools with high dropout rates are those with the highest number of racialized students" (Colour of Poverty, 2019, p. 4). In the TDSB, which is the largest and one of the most diverse school boards in Canada with 583 schools and serving more than 246,000 students, "students of African ascendance experience a 38% dropout rate and students from Central and South America had a 37% dropout rate" (Brown, 2009, p. 4).

CSI provided a holistic education model reflecting the needs of the students and the families it serves. Parents, students, and teachers as a collective expressed that they felt the CSI provided students who were struggling in the school system an opportunity to improve socially,

emotionally, and academically. Parents felt that the learning environment was inclusive and welcoming by being "family-centred," similar to a community hub. Having the support of coaches, extra tutoring, and academic support during the week remotely, access to technologies such as iPads and smartboards, and teachers that reflected the cultural identities of students who made the learning "fun and engaging," were identified by students and parents as strengths of the CSI. As one parent expressed, "YAAACE supports in the development of creating lasting relationships while building social skills and demonstrating the importance of respect. The public school system often does not provide this, especially in lower income and predominantly Black communities."

The involvement of coaches with the delivery of the educational component was seen as an integral component for the success of the CSI. The effectiveness of coaches being involved was ranked very high at 9.33 by the parents on a scale of 1 to 10. In the focus group, teachers also spoke very highly of the impact of coaches on the learning environment both in-person and remotely, contributing to increased student engagement and accountability. As one teacher explained, "It was night and day in terms of the difference in terms of behavior when the coaches got involved." Similarly, parents shared immense praise for the presence of the coaches by describing the great respect their children had for the coaches due to providing constant mentorship in and out of the classroom.

Teachers and parents expressed how supporting students was more challenging remotely. Some of the challenges were due to students and parents not having adequate access to internet or personal devices, such as the case with families with multiple children. Some parents also did not have adequate home space to support their children, with one parent stating, "Suitable environment without distractions is hard to identify at home." These challenges reflect the opportunity gap where systemic inequities create barriers that impede optimal student achievement. Many studies have found that students from higher-income and white families are more likely to overcome these challenges by being able to afford digital devices, adequate internet, tutors, and extracurricular supplemental educational programs that have positive effects on their academic and social development (Bonal & Gonzalez, 2020; Ekeh & Okeke, 2019; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; James, 2020; Royal Society of Canada, 2021; Toronto Foundation, 2021).

Centering Community Voices as Part of Knowledge Mobilization and Dissemination

As we completed the project findings, we posted the final report on the research blog to make it accessible to the community: https://www.communityschoolinitiative.com/. The final 22-page report, titled *Addressing the Social Determinants of Learning: The Community School Initiative Closing the Achievement Gap for Racialized Under-Resourced Communities,* was made visually engaging and concise with intentionality to appeal to the community. We hosted a one-day culminating symposium in hybrid format in February 2022 with community leaders, scholars, educators, parents, students, local school trustees, and other stakeholders to engage the larger community in the findings from the research and to discuss next steps to make equitable changes in the community. We began the day with opening remarks from YAAACE co-founder Devon Jones, followed with a presentation by the research team about the research findings and recommendations. Three panels were

IMAGE 2. FLYER FOR THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL INITIATIVE SYMPOSIUM HOSTED IN HYBRID FORMAT IN

hosted throughout the day. The first panel was a community perspective panel exploring the theme of "Successes and Challenges in Implementing Holistic and Culturally Relevant Programming in Jane and Finch." The second panel focused on the perspectives of students and parents, with the theme of "Experiences Attending the Community School Initiative and Other YAAACE Programs." The final panel for the day focused on leadership in the community, with the theme of "Mitigating Root Causes of Systemic Barriers for Teaching and Learning in Racialized Under-Resourced Communities." The leadership panel included a teacher from the CSI, a local elementary school principal, and two local school trustees who represent the neighborhood from the public and Catholic board. All sessions were recorded and posted on the research blog website.

Conclusion

Findings indicate that public-private community partnerships such as the CSI effectively mobilized in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic to close the achievement gap by focusing on mitigating systemic inequities in the Jane and Finch community that created barriers for student achievement rooted in inequality of opportunity. CSI as a case study, supplemented with the community-driven approach of the research project, can inform ways teacher-scholars need to continue to work with marginalized communities and community agencies in the wake of the pandemic and post-pandemic to meet needs of families and students, particularly within racialized under-resourced communities. This is where research has the potential to be transformative as a tool and platform for advocacy, resistance, and activism to reflect the needs and lived experiences of community residents. While the negative impact of systemic inequities was intensified by COVID-19, the CSI mobilized in a short span of time to identify and respond to these challenges by prioritizing access to academic programs in ways that were affordable, accessible, and socio-culturally relevant, sustaining, and responsive to the needs of families in the Jane and Finch community. Although the CSI had its challenges, particularly around how to adapt the curriculum for lower achieving students as well as engaging and supporting students more consistently in a remote context, findings are promising as they demonstrate the potential for reciprocal non-profit community organizations and private enterprise partnerships to mitigate the opportunity gap outside of school hours to help students progress towards their full potential.

CSI serves as an example of how the achievement gap can be minimized by focusing on mitigating the opportunity gap by involving a team of caring adults working collaboratively to provide continuity of care and enhance access to support systems and timely academic prevention and intervention strategies to optimize student achievement. One of the key characteristics that contributed to the success of the CSI was providing mentorship and holistic programming from diverse educators and staff that reflect the cultural identities of students and families in the program. Another integral characteristic was offering programs through people who have established trust and rapport with the community and understand the local needs

of the neighborhood, including the magnitude of systemic inequities influencing the teaching and learning conditions in schools and the larger community. Benefits of CSI during the pandemic align with findings from the larger literature which emphasize that supplemental educational programs offered by non-profits are significant in helping mitigate the impact of learning loss, particularly for racialized students and under-resourced communities. Unaffordability in accessing quality structured programs remains a key learning barrier driven largely by systemic inequities. This is where there is potential for synergetic collaborative partnerships between organizations and agencies to mitigate systemic barriers impeding student achievement at the community level. This will differ for each community, and by extension for each postal code, as every neighborhood has its own unique challenges.

References

Ahmadi, D. (2018). Diversity and social cohesion: The case of Jane-Finch, a highly diverse lower-income Toronto neighbourhood. *Urban Research & Practice*, *11*(2), 139-158.

Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint!* Duke University Press.

Ansell, E.S. (2011). Achievement gap. *Education Week.* https://www.edweek.org/leadership/achievement-gap/2004/09

Au, W. (2010). *Unequal by design: High-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality*. Routledge.

Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*, *30*(1), 39-62.

Battiste, M. (2013). Possibilities of educational transformations. In *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*. (pp. 175-191). UBC press.

Bonal, X. & González, S. (2020). The impact of lockdown on the learning gap: Family and school divisions in times of crisis. *International Review of Education*, 66, 635-655.

Brown, R. (2009). *Making the grade: The grade 9 cohort of fall 2002: Overview. Research Report.*

Carter, P. L., & Welner, K. G. (2013). *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance*. Oxford University Press.

Choi, K., Zajacova, A., Haan, M., & Denice, P. (May 2020) Data linking race and health predicts new COVID-19 hotspots. *The Conversation.* https://theconversation.com/data-linking-race-and-health-predicts-new-covid-19-hotspots-138579

Clarke, V. & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis, *The Journal of Psychology*, 12(3), 297-298.

Colour of Poverty. (2019). *Fact sheet #3: Racialized poverty in education & learning*.

https://colourofpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/cop-coc-fact-sheet-3-racialized-poverty-in-education-learning-3.pdf

Curtis, B., Livingstone, D. W., & Smaller, H. (1992). *Stacking the deck: The streaming of working-class kids in Ontario schools* (Vol. 24). James Lorimer & Company.

Dei, G. J. S. (2008). Schooling as community: Race, schooling, and the education of African youth. *Journal of Black Studies*, 38(3), 346–366.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2000). *The Handbook of Qualitative Research.* Sage Publications.

Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2015). Top reasons you can't compare standardized testing in Ontario and the United States. Queen's Printer for Ontario. https://www.eqao.com/wp-content/uploads/infographic-EQAO-US-comparison.pdf

Ekeh, B. & Okeke F. C. (2019). *Intervening through supplemental education programs: Evidence from Toronto's Jane and Finch community.* https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d51aee5dfba7800013fa660/t/5dee4bbe4d5f2571c8f0134e/1575898049179/INTERVENING%2BTHROUGH%2BSUPPLEMENTAL%2BEDUCATION%2BPROGRAMS-%2B%2BEVIDENCE%2BFROM%2BTORONTO%E2%80%99S%2BJANE%2BAND%2BFINCH%2BCOMMMUNITY.pdf

Eizadirad, A. & Campbell, A. (2021). Visibilizing our pain and wounds as resistance and activist pedagogy to heal and hope: Reflections of 2 racialized professors. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*. 15(4), 241-251. DOI: 10.1080/15595692.2021.1937600

Eizadirad, A. (2020). Closing the achievement gap via reducing the opportunity gap; YAAACE's social inclusion framework within the Jane and Finch community. In Trifonas, P. (Eds.) *Handbook of Theory and Research in Cultural Studies and Education* (pp. 275-297). Springer International Handbooks of Education. Springer, Cham.

Eizadirad, A., & Sider, S. (2020, July 23). Schools after coronavirus: Seize 'teachable moments' about racism and inequities. *The Conversation.* https://theconversation.com/schools-after-coronavirus-seize-teachable-moments-about-racism-and-inequities-142238

Eizadirad, A. (2019). *Decolonizing educational assessment: Ontario elementary students and the EQAO*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Eizadirad, A., & Portelli, J. (2018). Subversion in education: Common misunderstandings & myths. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 9(1), 53–72.

Eizadirad, A. (2017). The university as a neoliberal and colonizing institute; A spatial case study analysis of the invisible fence between York University and the Jane and Finch neighbourhood in the City of Toronto. *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry,* 4(1), 25-53.

Fraser Institute, (2022). *School rankings Ontario*. https://www.compareschoolrankings.org/

Gallagher-Mackay, K., Srivastava, P., Underwood, K., Dhuey, E., McCready, L., Born, K., &

Sander, B. (2021). COVID-19 and education disruption in Ontario: Emerging evidence on

impacts. *Science Briefs of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table*. 2(34), 1-36.

https://doi.org/10.47326/ocsat.2021.02.34.1.0

Goodyear, S. (2021, April 7). *Why people in Ontario's hardest-hit neighbourhoods are*

struggling to get vaccines | CBC Radio. CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-wednesday-edition-1.5978289/why-people-in-ontario-s-hardest-hit-neighbourhoods-are-struggling-to-get-vaccines-1.5978297

Gorski, P. C. (2018). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap*. Teachers College Press.

James, C. (2020). *Racial inequity, COVID-19 and the education of Black and other marginalized students.* Royal Society of Canada Working Group on the Impact of COVID-19 in Racialized Communities. https://rsc-src.ca/sites/default/files/RC%20PB_EN%20FINAL_0.pdf

James, C. E. (2012). *Life at the intersection: Community, class and schooling*. Fernwood Publishing.

Kempf, A. (2016). *The pedagogy of standardized testing: The radical impacts of educational standardization in the US and Canada*. Springer.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in US schools. *Educational Researcher*, *35*(7), 3-12.

Lopez, R. G. (2003). The (racially neutral) politics of education: A critical race theory. perspective, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(1), 68-94.

McMurtry, R., & Curling, A. (2008). The review of the roots of youth violence.

Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/professionals/oyap/roots/index.aspx

Narain, S. (2012). The re-branding project: The genealogy of creating a neoliberal Jane and Finch. *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry*, 2(1), 54–94.

Nezavdal, F. (2003). The standardized testing movement: Equitable or excessive? *McGill Journal of Education*, 38(1), 65–78.

People for Education. (2021). *The far-reaching costs of losing extracurricular activities during COVID-19.* https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/People-for-Education-The-Cost-of-Losing-Extra-Curricular-Activities-April-2021.pdf

Pinto, L. E. (2016). Tensions and fissures: The politics of standardised testing and accountability in Ontario, 1995–2015. *The Curriculum Journal*, 27(1), 95–112.

Richardson, C. (2008). Canada's toughest neighborhood: Surveillance, myth, and orientalism in Jane-finch (master's thesis). St. Catharines: Brock University.

Rigakos, G., Kwashie, F., & Bosanac, S. (2004). *The San Romanoway community revitalization project: Interim report.*

Royal Society of Canada. (2021). *Children and schools during COVID-19 and beyond: Engagement and connection through opportunity.* https://rsc-src.ca/sites/default/files/C%26S%20PB_EN_0.pdf

Schlueter, J. (2021). Education reform: What is really achieved by trying to close achievement gaps? *Radical Teacher*, *121*, 77-84.

Shah, V. (2018). Different numbers, different stories: Problematizing "Gaps" in Ontario and the TDSB. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy,* 187, 31-47.

Spirit of Math (2022). *We take math education to the next level!* https://spiritofmath.com/spirit-of-math-difference

Statistics Canada, (2022). *Canada's population clock (real-time model).* https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2018005-eng.htm

Tett, L., & Hamilton, M.. (2021). *Resisting neoliberalism in education: Local, national and transnational perspectives*. Policy Press.

Toronto District School Board. (2020). *The 2020 Learning Opportunity Index: Questions and answers.* https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/LOI2020.pdf

Toronto Foundation. (2021). *Toronto's vital signs: 2021 report.* https://torontofoundation.ca/vitalsigns2021/

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action.* https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls_to_action_english2.pdf

United Way. (2019). *Rebalancing the opportunity equation*. https://www.unitedwaygt.org/file/2019_OE_fullreport_FINAL.pdf

Volante, L. (2007). Educational quality and accountability in Ontario: Past, present, and future. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 58, 1–21.

Williams, C., Jones, D., & Bailey, R. (2013). *From the margins: Building curriculum for youth in transition*. Ministry of Justice & Youth Association for Academics, Athletics and Character Education. https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/db8abedc-1a4d-4320-9a84-15c7eba69de8/downloads/From%20the%20Margins%20-%20Building%20Curriculum%20for%20You.pdf?ver=1662931293359

Yang, J., Allen, K., Mendleson, R., & Bailey, A. (2020, June 28). Toronto's COVID-19 divide: The City's northwest corner has been 'failed by the system'. *Toronto Star.* https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/06/28/torontos-covid-19-divide-the-citysnorthwest-corner-has-been-failed-by-the-system.html

Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education, (2022). *About us.* http://yaaace.com/about-us/

Ardavan Eizadirad (@DrEizadirad) is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He is the author of *Decolonizing Educational Assessment: Ontario Elementary Students and the EQAO* (2019), and co-editor of *Equity as Praxis in Early Childhood Education and Care* (2021) and of *Counternarratives of Pain and Suffering as Critical Pedagogy: Disrupting Oppression in Educational Contexts* (2022). Dr. Eizadirad is also the founder and Director of *EDIcation Consulting* (www.edication.org), offering equity, diversity, and inclusion training to organizations.

Sally Abudiab is a Palestinian Canadian who recently completed her Master of Social Work at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto. She has experience working with organizations at various levels including non-profits such as the Ontario Neurotrauma Foundation and Daughters for Life, and governmental agencies such as the Department of National Defence. Her research interests include disability studies, equity and social justice, health and wellbeing, and the experiences of athletes. During her spare time, Sally enjoys rollerblading, baking, and clearing the clutter.

Brice Baartman is a Canadian/South African student who recently graduated with his Bachelor of Education and Master of Teaching from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He has been working and volunteering with children and youth in under-resourced communities for over 10 years through the Community Healing Project, People's Elite Basketball, Stella's Place, Kiwanis Boys and Girls Club, the Toronto District School Board, and other organizations in the Greater Toronto Area. His research interests include financial literacy education, mental health, anti-discriminatory practices, asset-based community development, and social justice education.