

Theme: Structured Programming in Racialized Communities

Structured programming for children and youth outside of school hours has dramatically increased over the past decade (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). Regular participation in after-school programming is associated with improved health outcomes, civic engagement, and occupational attainment later in life (Snellman et al., 2015). Further, research on after-school programming emphasizes the importance of peer relationships, youth engagement, and leadership, all of which are associated with positive developmental outcomes (Neild, Wilson, & McClanahan; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). When after-school programs are embedded in community hubs, they can promote upward mobility for families and students. Community hubs encourage local residents to meet in a shared, recognized gathering space to access health, social, cultural, recreational, and other resources. Many Ontarians agree that community hubs are vibrant centres of community life that generate economic and social benefits and foster strong and vital communities (Community hubs, 2021). With these benefits and increasing demands in mind, in 2015, then Premier Kathleen Wynne sought to understand how to support community hub development to continue to serve the unique needs of neighbourhoods, whether in a high-density inner-city or isolated rural community, and thus a framework was designed to better enable community hubs to provide high-quality services and resource.

Schools as community hubs, as a concept, can be traced back to Henry Morris's 1920s idea of Village College, along with John Dewey's (1902) concept of schools as social centres. Schools are a focal point of community activity. Still, intentional partnerships that transform relationships between schools and their local communities are needed. Schools as community hubs can not only act to mitigate the impact of poverty on learners, but can position schools at the centre of communities, and build community resilience and capacity (Fay et al., 2020; Haig,

2014; Pacheco et al., 2021). Inner-cities are traditionally underserved due to poor access to services and social support programs, and thus disadvantaged. Residents in under-resourced communities are systemically disadvantaged due to the vulnerable living conditions they experience. This has correlations with poor mental and physical health, among other outcomes, leading to lower educational achievements for children, all of which reinforce a cycle of disadvantage and systemic oppression (MacDonald, 2020). Educational disadvantage, or the social and/or systemic barriers that prevents a student from getting the same value from education in their school in comparison to their peers, coupled with geographically concentrated disadvantage, is a matter of social injustice (Rowley et al., 2020). Students who are disadvantaged experience a combination of factors involving *inherited* disadvantage (i.e., that due to socioeconomic position) and *spatial* disadvantage (i.e., the environmental context). (Manley et al., 2019).

The importance of embedding science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) education within a meaningful context has long been recognized as central for safe communities and robust societies (Duodu et al., 2017). Despite the increasing importance of STEAM education, performance in subjects like mathematics for Black students attending schools across the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), one of the largest school boards in North America, lags behind other students their age (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017). In other words, Black students are consistently outperformed by their non-racialized peers. Thus, it is critical for educators to facilitate a discursive, inquiry-focused atmosphere in the classroom to address the achievement gap that is ever growing, particularly the root causes contributing to this trend. The achievement gap refers to the persistent disparity in academic performance between different groups of students, including white students and minorities or students from higher-income and

lower-income households (Hartney & Flavin, 2014; Rozek et al., 2019). With robust evidence that suggests this gap has only widened due to the additional barriers created by the pandemic (Goudeau et al., 2021; Pozo-Rico et al., 2020; Toquero & Talidong, 2020; Llerna-Izquierdo & Ayala-Carabaio, 2020; La Velle et al., 2020; Assuncao Flores & Gago, 2020), there is a need to support additional mathematics learning, as well as other subjects, for Black and marginalized students. While there are certainly larger societal issues of inequity that contribute to the achievement gap, schools that implement evidence-based best practices with respect to programming have been able to narrow this gap significantly (Reich et al., 2020).

One way to address the achievement gap among low-income and racialized communities is through after-school programs. After-school programs face increasing pressure to demonstrate academic achievement of participants, particularly in programs serving low-income communities (Philp & Gill, 2020). High-income families have embraced after-school programming as an enrichment mechanism to developing youth interest, identity, and social capital for post-secondary education and beyond (Lareau, 2011), creating an engagement gap between those who can afford to pay for programming and those who cannot (Snellman et al., 2015). Given the importance of the benefits of organized programs for adolescents and families, increasing access and enrollment is a priority for practitioners and policy makers, and considerable effort should be devoted to understanding who takes part in the programs to mitigate some of the effects on the engagement gap.

Ontario is now in its second year of education disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related policy school closures, which have negatively impacted students' educational experiences. Schools provide an environment for extra-curricular and after-school programs. Disruptions also had an impact on students' social connectedness with others. Social

connectedness is associated to “higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, lower rates of substance use and violence, participation in fewer risk-taking behaviours, increased likelihood of completing secondary school, and greater feelings of positive mental health” (Dove et al., 2020, p. 14). Moreover, given that these programs attempt to close disparities in academic performance and supplement learning, school closures meant that gaps were intensifying for racialized communities who regularly accessed these programs.

After-school programs provide students and youths opportunities to develop social competence and increase academic competencies. Compared to the regular classroom content, after-school programs provide an opportunity for students to continue to progress their learning, as well as develop a host of social-emotional skills. Using a variety of measures, from standardized testing to school grades to teacher perceptions, research has found that structured after-school programs in marginalized and low-income communities can significantly improve both learning and academic performance (Beasley, 2020; Christensen & Ruben, 2020; Philp & Gill, 2020). For example, Grogan et al. (2014), found that, when teachers evaluated students, structured after-school programs that focused on engagement in academic, youth development, and art activities were all correlated with academic skills within the school classroom.

Longitudinal data from 530 students was analyzed to examine associations via an exploratory factor analysis between staff ratings of student engagement in afterschool activities and between engagement and school outcomes. Importantly, these programs not only improved performance, but also improved student perceptions of academics, their motivation to go to school, and their future aspirations. Additionally, Chittum et al. (2017) found that after participating in after-school programs, students had statistically significant higher college plans, science attainment value, science interest value, science utility value, and science competence beliefs compared to

non-participants, while these values decreased over time for non-participants. In their study, middle and high-school students, mostly female and white, were asked to complete a survey and an interview on their perceptions of their science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) sessions to understand how this shaped and motivated their interest in STEM concepts and fields. Critically, it is important to note that the skills developed were not solely academic. As was found by Grogan et al. (2014), teachers noted that students who took part in after-school programs were more likely to develop and improve their social competence skills. Overall, as a collective, the studies point out that structured after-school programs are beneficial to students in marginalized communities and can help them improve not just academically but also socially and emotionally. Equally important, after-school programs provide a unique developmental context for adolescents to experience positive phenomenological states including heightened engagement, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, personal satisfaction, flow, and initiative (Shernoff, 2010). For low income and racialized students, after-school programs strengthen the administrator/teacher-student relationship by fostering communication, developing a sense of empowerment, and exposing youths to influentially positive mentors in the community (Woodland, 2016).

Structured programs are usually designed to fit as many students needs as possible. Having a structured curriculum makes it easier in some cases for teachers to teach online and spend more time tutoring and interacting with students. Using a variety of effective strategies to motivate students has positive outcomes on student online learning (Borup et al., 2014). For example, students learn cooperation and teamwork skills during extracurricular and community-based activities. Additional structured programs like tutoring programs by trained volunteers improve student academic performance and fosters interactions between teachers and students.

Structured programs and courses are also vital to support student online learning. The self-regulated learning (SRL) framework supports remote learning with digital tools during the pandemic. The SRL framework includes the cognitive, metacognitive, behavioural, motivational, and emotional/affective aspects of learning (Panadero, 2017). It is, therefore, an extraordinary umbrella under which a considerable number of variables that influence learning (e.g., self-efficacy, volition, cognitive strategies) are studied within a comprehensive and holistic approach (Rosa et al., 2021). Students use metacognitive skills in learning to proactively think, perform, and reflect. Virtual scaffolding helps build self-regulated learning because the focus is on the provision of tools to organize content and activities. SRL framework outlines that structured programs are effective when communication is continuous, expectations are clear and concise, the program is accommodating to individual needs, activities are engaging and encouraging, and there are social, emotional, and financial resources available to families.

After-school programs can enrich and supplement students' learning experiences and promote STEM interest and motivational beliefs about science and intentions to pursue higher education (Chittum et al., 2017). In a study by Baran et al. (2016), 6th grade female students from Turkey reported developing critical cognitive skills like argumentation and reasoning through a supplementary, hands-on program. In this study, 40 students participated in STEM education programming over forty hours (approximately 3 weekends). Importantly, students reported suggestions that addressed use of materials. Compared to students who did not attend STEM-focused supplementary programs, students who attended the program valued understanding the material more than non-participants. Therefore, there was a positive correlation with STEM supplementary education creating interest for careers in STEM-related fields (Baran et al., 2016).

Another benefit of structured programming is establishing positive teacher-student relationships (McClure et al., 2010). For example, mentorship was key to building trusting relationships as students participated in programs. Access to meaningful mentorship opportunities from teachers and staff can play a critical role in supporting STEM learning amongst students within informal learning environments (Carrino & Gerace, 2016). In addition, structured programs allow for opportunities for consistent engagement of both the teachers and students, which in turn fosters a sense of community. For this to happen, the opportunity for consistent and meaningful engagement must be present. Research suggests that programs that engage youth over a longer period of time have more success, as it can lead to deeper connections and relationships with the participants and with the community (Deschenes et al., 2010; Adams et al., 2014).

While after-school programs are beneficial to students in marginalized communities, it is important to highlight that the implementation of these programs possesses unique challenges and barriers. A key framework by which this can be addressed is an ecological systems approach. This theoretical framework states that student development occurs through a complex process of interactions with and between the individual and the environments they find themselves in. Thus, to effectively implement structured programs in marginalized communities, it is important to recognize the complexities of the communities, such as if the students are in two-parent households, having to care for others, and other factors. These, and many other systemic factors, such as the extent of barriers impacting the neighbourhood through the intersection of racism and poverty may influence the methods and practices to be enacted to ensure successful implementation. Furthermore, Schnirer and Stack-Cutler (2012), in their report on the implementation of programming in low-income communities outlined a host of challenges

and strategies to be considered for effective program implementation. For instance, a key barrier to the successful implementation of a program is having to earn the trust of the community in which the program will take place. To do so, the authors recommend that programs form a connection to key stakeholders in the community, such as churches and other community organizations, to boost their reputation. Additionally, programs should be aware of the stereotypes and negative connotations that are attached to labels such as “marginalized” or “low-income,” and thus must make sure not to be overly explicit in their branding, as it may work to push families away, rather than attract them. This is referred to as deficit thinking.

We encourage a shift to an asset-based strength-based approach for implementation of structured community-based programs, particularly in racialized low-income communities. This aligns with an Asset Based Community Development approach, whereby communities are not dependant on external initiatives but use and capitalize on inherent gifts and resources within the community to grow and prosper. This approach encourages and inspires transformative change and capacity-building between people and grassroots organizations which can be a powerful and effective way to engage the larger community and spread positive change in addressing systemic barriers. Also, a persistent challenge in implementing structured programs in racialized communities is in the area of outreach and promotion, as youth are initially hesitant to join STEM programs especially when there are other programs such as those focused on sports.

Lastly, when trying to ensure that participants of community programs find success, it is important to note that they do not exist in isolation, and that they are surrounded by a support network (or lack thereof) that’s made up of their family, educators, and peers, amongst others. Amongst the research, it was common to look at a child’s support network through the lens of the Adolescent Communities of Engagement (ACE) framework (Borup et al., 2014), which

states that there are two communities to help student engagement. The first is the course community associated with the delivery of courses through schools, such as the teachers and other students. The second is a student's community, such as their parents and friends. Both communities can provide affective, behavioural, and cognitive support during the shift to remote learning. Thus, the successful implementation of online, structured programs, in marginalized communities requires attention to the support network of the students, who they can consistently access and for what purposes, and how these relationships can be maximized.

In a Canadian-based study, a number of challenges were reported specifically with implementing structured programs, such as navigating community-based issues in a collaborative approach with multiple stakeholders and partners (Duodo et al., 2017). When considering the Jane-Finch community, it is important to take into consideration the demographics of the community to identify and understand unique local needs and the extent to which there is capacity to assist in closing the opportunity gap. Jane-Finch as a neighbourhood was identified by the City of Toronto as a Neighbourhood Improvement Area in 2014, along with 30 other designated neighbourhoods. Diverse communities and groups make up the population of Jane-Finch. The Jane-Finch neighbourhood, a racialized community located in northwest Toronto, has experienced higher rates of COVID-19 than any other neighbourhood in the city (Goodyear, 2021). The neighbourhood accommodates more youth, single-parent families, refugees, individuals without a secondary-school diploma, low-income households, and public housing tenants than any other neighbourhood in Toronto (Ahmadi, 2018), which makes Jane-Finch a constant target of negative media depictions. Within dominant narratives in the media, the social problems of the neighbourhood are often blamed on its residents without much attention given to the systematic and structural inequities which have influenced the neighbourhood's trajectory of

development leading to its current conditions. With respect to education and student achievement, inequities in access to community programs further disadvantage students who are racialized and/or from lower-socio economic backgrounds.

Within the context of COVID-19 and emergency remote learning, a key challenge is the limited resources for STEM-focused programs, which often requires access to technologies and instruments that are costly and not readily available to disadvantaged communities. Using the same example above, knowing that the families of people from attending schools in Jane-Finch are from a lower socio-economic status (SES), it would be ill-advised to recommend additional technologies without providing subsidies or grants for these families and students. The Learning Opportunity Index (LOI) ranks schools in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) based on external challenges affecting student success. A goal of the TDSB is to ensure all students have access to equitable opportunities to succeed, even for students with fewer resources at home and in their neighbourhoods. There are six variables in the LOI that have been identified as external factors that impact education achievement: (1) median family income, (2) percentage of families whose income is below the low-income measure (before tax), (3) percentage of families receiving social assistance, (4) adults with low education, (5) adults with university degrees, and (6) single-parent families. Another popular tool that ranks school performance, yet on a different measure altogether, is the Fraser Institute School Rankings. The Fraser Institute's school rankings exclusively use publicly-available data such as average scores on province-wide tests. Many schools, both elementary and secondary, in the Jane-Finch community are ranked high on the LOI (i.e., they need more resources relative to student needs) and low on the Fraser Institute's School Rankings (i.e., poor performance on provincial standardized testing). In sum, both the LOI and the Fraser Institute School Rankings rank schools across a variety of measures;

however, the LOI takes into consideration external factors and systemic barriers that may affect student performance whereas the the Fraser Institute School Rankings do not.

Given the challenges associated with implementing structured programming in racialized communities, it is important to consider how intentionality in teaching can be utilized to facilitate better learning outcomes. The abrupt transition to remote learning highlighted the importance of intentional program design for students, with educators paying particular attention to differences in home environment, parental engagement, and access to resources across students, all of which are factors that severely may inhibit learning and lower student engagement (Garbe et al., 2020). It is widely accepted that students from a dominant cultures experience advantages at school, because home and school cultures align more easily with their cultural capital and ways of being, whereas those coming from minoritized racial, cultural, ethnic, and linguistically diverse backgrounds do not (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Richards et al., 2007). Racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students from minoritized groups are historically oppressed and marginalized by the education system including those students that come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds that have experienced sustained school failure over time (Eizadirad, 2019; Panozzo-Solanot, 2020). Currently, there is insufficient prioritization and equitable school resource allocation to address the root causes of student failure rooted in systemic barriers impacting communities, without which there is little chance to help bridge and encourage more equitable schooling experiences for these students. A holistic approach to education can address students' learning, social, and emotional needs with an emphasis on minimizing the opportunity gap. Intentional programming in education is achieved through culturally responsive (CRP) and sustaining pedagogies where inequities in education can be addressed (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). CRT from an ecological place-based framework

provides the means to centre lived experiences of racialized identities to identify systemic barriers that impede the progress of the residents for upward social mobility. From a CRT perspective, one must inquire about how racism operates as collective processes embedded within the DNA and social fabric of our institutions, represented within the dominant discourse as neutral policies and practices that proclaim equality of opportunity for all (Eizadirad & Portelli, 2018). Specifically, Dixon and Anderson (2018) identified six boundaries for CRT and education:

- (1) Within a system that prides itself on achievement and competition, racial inequity is the logical outcome in education.
- (2) Education policy and educational practices fuel the construction of racial inequity and the perpetuation of normative whiteness.
- (3) Rejects the belief that there is an inherent inferiority of people of color and an inherent superiority of white people.
- (4) Examines the historical linkages between present-day educational inequity and historical patterns of racial oppression.
- (5) Engages in intersectional analyses that recognize the ways that race is mediated by and interacts with other identity markers (i.e., gender, class, sexuality, linguistic background, and citizenship status).
- (6) Advocates for racial equity through action not just documenting disparities.

In the past decade, scholars and policymakers have begun to focus their attention on other achievement gaps, such as those based on gender, English-language proficiency, and learning disabilities. While there has been a recent interest in research discussing culturally responsive practice as a means of addressing inequities in education, teachers and school staff lack clear

examples and tools for best practices that will aid them in addressing the achievement gap and larger inequities within their schools. Response to Intervention (RTI) as a framework and approach provides a comprehensive model that aligns with the requirements of culturally relevant pedagogy (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). A big part of the RTI involves identifying the needs of students and then closely and consistently monitoring student progress in response to various intervention strategies. This approach helps schools track which students need more academic support. Based on this model, educators focus on addressing the needs of the students, through formative and summative assessment data collected and monitored over time, with a focus on outcomes to provide high quality instruction and intervention. RTI has been utilized for youth with learning difficulties in reading, writing, or mathematics as well as youth with school-based disruptive behaviour, emotional disturbances, and problematic social behaviour (Hawkin et al. 2008). Such approaches could intersect well with broader practices to enhance school climate and student engagement and attendance such as (1) customizing curriculum and instruction to individual academic needs, and (2) developing alternative and flexible educational methods for more accumulation of academic credit (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; see Murakahmi-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012).

Overall, structured programs may not be effective without consideration for the local needs and circumstances of students. Research on the best practices related to culturally responsive pedagogy and presenting the rationale behind the use of culturally responsive practices as a means of addressing the achievement gap and the disproportionate representation of students from racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds in programs serving diverse students is needed. As a response, our research project aims to (1) understand the dimensions and elements of structured programs that support racialized and low-

income students to succeed in STEAM courses, and (2) the impact of structured programs on students' learning and experience with a particular focus on the racialized student and community experience. Findings from this study can help inform policymakers and stakeholders in mitigating barriers to high-quality supplementary programming for racialized and low-income communities.

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