

RE: SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant: *COVID-19: Closing the Achievement Gap through Remote Learning for Children and Youth in Racialized and Under-Resourced Communities*

Longitudinal Research Partnership with the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University, Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE) and Spirit of Math.

YAAACE has partnered with Drs. Ardavan Eizadirad and Steve Sider in the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University for a longitudinal research project titled “COVID-19: Closing the Achievement Gap through Remote Learning for Children and Youth in Racialized and Under-Resourced Communities” funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). This is part of the comprehensive program feedback we are collecting to continue to enhance programs and services offered by YAAACE.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the delivery of education, with school boards and educational programs transitioning between brick and mortar and online learning. Critics have observed the negative impacts of school disruptions for underprivileged children and youth, particularly those from racialized communities, who have fewer resources and supports available at home (Eizadirad & Sider, 2020; Colour of Poverty, 2019; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). Although schools in Ontario reopened in September of 2020, many of the extracurricular programs that provide much needed support for marginalized children and youth were inaccessible or disrupted because of the covid-19 pandemic and this will be the case the foreseeable future. Over the long-term, inequalities in access to community programs can further disadvantage students who are racialized and/or from lower-socio economic backgrounds.

Since its inception in 2007, YAAACE has created community partnerships with various stakeholders (e.g. school boards, City of Toronto, Health Centers (Blackcreek Community and Health center/Rexdale Community and Health center), Service Canada etc.) to mitigate systemic barriers impacting the achievement of students from the highly racialized and under-resourced communities including “Jane and Finch” located in northwest Toronto. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it much more difficult for YAAACE to provide the supports needed by members of the Jane and Finch community. Toronto’s northwest cluster of neighbourhoods, including Jane and Finch, have experienced higher rates of COVID-19 than other neighbourhoods in the city. The pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges and presents new hardships for marginalized communities and families associated with loss of income, lack of access to social support, increased care responsibilities, and increased likelihood of contracting COVID-19. It is thus critical for community organizations such as YAAACE to continue to deliver high-quality supports and resources for children and youth to mitigate larger systemic inequities impacting the residents throughout the pandemic. YAAACE offered remote programming in July and August 2020 via its Summer Institute Program but noted a significant drop in participation and other challenges such as how to offer appropriate remote programming to the youngest students. Through preliminary meetings with the researchers at Wilfrid Laurier University, YAAACE voiced a need for research to assess the effectiveness of its community-school supplemental education programs and to identify barriers preventing children and families from accessing its remote programming.

The overall goal of this research project is to enhance YAAACE’s capacity to provide effective programming to children and youth from the Jane and Finch community, thus mitigating some of the challenges facing poor and racialized communities in the face of the pandemic (Eizadirad, 2020). In collaboration with YAAACE staff and youth project advisors, surveys and interviews were to be administered to the educators, parents, and students in the “Community School Initiative” to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) Assess the effectiveness of YAAACE's "Community School Initiative" (Evening Academy, Weekend Academy, and the Summer Institute) as it transitions from in-person to virtual remote delivery.
- 2) Identify barriers preventing access and engagement in YAAACE's remote learning programs.
- 3) Identify effective remote instruction programming and pedagogies that can supplement the education programs currently offered by YAAACE.

The partnership provided a better understanding of how community-based programming can be mobilized in the COVID-19 era to close the opportunity gap as it impacts BIPOC and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This approach goes beyond an exclusive focus on outcome-based results to considering collaborative efforts between schools and community organizations offering holistic interdisciplinary programs and services to address the needs of the community members and mitigate the systemic barriers impacting the community particularly in relation to access to opportunities for upward social mobility.

The preliminary findings from the research project showed that the opportunity gap has certainly widened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Preliminary findings, based on coding of the data from the surveys (YAAACE staff, youth advisors, and parent advisors) and the teacher focus group generated the following themes to be further explored: structured program model adaptations to meet the needs of the students and the larger community where the students come from, teacher supports and training, intentional programming that is socio-culturally relevant and responsive, and equitable access to technology and holistic support systems (e.g. coaches/mentors being involved with academic programming). Emerging findings from the intersection of these themes will help maximize success of extra-curricular programs offered by community organizations outside of schools.

Community partnerships like YAAACE and Spirit of Math provided an opportunity to close the opportunity gaps and improve access through holistic programming that takes into consideration the needs of the community and the systemic issues impacting the neighbourhood. Holistic and interdisciplinary community programming can minimize the achievement gap by providing equitable educational opportunities to students from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. At present, however, there is little academic or applied knowledge of best practices for effectively transitioning face-to-face community programs to online formats.

This project contributes to filling in this gap in the literature by illustrating the components of holistic collaborative approaches to offering community school programming to mitigate systemic inequities impacting teaching and learning within racialized and under-resourced communities. For service users, the Community School Initiative had a positive impact on learning and development and was said to be "family-centred", yet it had its challenges when it came to parental engagement and access to technology to facilitate optimal learning and effective pedagogy. These early findings suggest that community organizations have a positive impact on students' needs. It is suggested that schools work more closely with community organizations to align their programming to close the opportunity gaps thus impacting the community and the families they serve. This can lead to schools more effectively supporting families with a focus on mitigating systemic issues and their compounding impact (e.g. intersection of racism and poverty).

As part of knowledge dissemination, in June 2021, while collecting data via surveys and focus groups, the research team launched a blog for the research project (communityschoolinitiative.com), serving as a key resource for information access and updates for members of the Jane-Finch community and other stakeholders. The research team compiled and summarized relevant resources for various stakeholders to be accessible in user-friendly language via the research website. As such, the research team has prioritized knowledge translation initiatives so that the findings and resources are accessible to those it is meant to support and empower consequently creating more equitable educational programs during and post-pandemic.

The Community School Initiative can serve as a model to help researchers and educators understand the experiences of racialized, low-income children and families who have been affected by education and extracurricular disruptions from the regular school year. Findings from the study can help towards closing opportunity gaps for racialized and under-resourced communities that are rooted in larger systemic inequities

Sincerely,

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