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Catharsis: Culturally Responsive Programming Enhancing Mental Health and Healing for Black Youth in Toronto, Canada

Nawesa Bollers, MSW^{1*}, Ardavan Eizadirad, Ph.D.²

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¹University of Toronto, Canada

²Wilfred Laurier University, Canada

*Corresponding author: Nawesa Bollers, marcella.bollers@utoronto.ca

Abstract. Black youth face unique challenges stemming from constant exposure to systemic and cultural racism, discrimination, and lack of access to culturally reflective services meeting their needs which significantly impacts their emotional well-being, career trajectories, and civic engagement. The research project explores the benefits of a culturally reflective program called Catharsis offered by the non-profit organisation, Generation Chosen, which focuses on supporting Black youth with their mental health, emotional intelligence, and civic engagement. Data was collected between December 2022 to April 2023. Surveys and focus groups were administered to Black youth aged 15 to 20 in Toronto, Canada who attended programming in the Jane and Finch community known as a racialized under-resourced neighbourhood. 29 surveys and 2 focus groups were administered totalling 55 respondents. Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework was applied to centre the lived experiences of the youth and listen to their concerns and ideas. Thematic analysis and triangulation of the data indicated that culturally reflective, trauma-informed programming can enhance emotional intelligence and lead to better coping mechanisms to manage stress. Participants reported improved life skills and mental health by accessing culturally reflective mental health service providers and engaging with staff who had similar lived experiences who modelled vulnerability as a form of strength and maturity. Overall, the research contributes to filling in the research gap in the Canadian context around the importance of culturally reflective, trauma-informed programming for Black youth and how it can foster healthy identity development.

Keywords: Trauma-informed, Mental Health, Black Youth, Culturally Reflective, Emotional Intelligence.

Introduction

In today's multicultural society, Black youth face unique challenges stemming from constant exposure to systemic and cultural racism, discrimination, and lack of access to culturally reflective services meeting their needs which significantly impacts their emotional well-being, career trajectories, and civic engagement (Alvarez, 2020; Bailey et al., 2023; Colour of Poverty- Colour of Change, 2019; Crichlow, 2014; Eizadirad, 2019; James, 2017; Hanna, 2019; Maynard, 2022; McMurtry and Curling, 2008). The objective of the research project was to gather insights about Generation Chosen's trauma-informed Catharsis program which is “geared towards providing youth and young adults with the necessary soft skills to navigate their way through adverse emotional disturbances and their interpersonal relationships that are fraught with psycho-social tensions” (Generation Chosen, 2024, para. 1). As defined by Generation Chosen (2024), emotional intelligence (EI) complements the term emotional quotient (EQ) which looks at the way people function and perform under duress. By extension, “EI is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's emotions effectively, as well as to empathize with others” (para. 4). As a result, this research project explored the benefits of a culturally reflective program offered by a Black-led and Black-serving non-profit organization focusing on mental health, emotional intelligence, and civic engagement and how the culturally reflective component is critical in meeting the emotional needs of Black youth given their experiences with systemic barriers, discrimination, and exposure to violence living in a low-income community.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework was applied to centre the lived experiences of the youth and listen to their concerns and ideas (Leonardo, 2013). Surveys and focus groups were administered to Black youth aged 15 to 20 in Toronto, Canada who attended programming in the Jane and Finch community which is known as a racialized under-resourced neighbourhood. The main research questions were: What are the lived experiences, particularly barriers and significant stressors, for Black youth living in an under-resourced community in Toronto? What are the benefits of accessing culturally reflective, trauma-informed programming? How can trauma-informed programming facilitate healing from trauma and foster healthy identity development? The goal was to provide avenues for the youth to express themselves and centre their day to day lived experiences. This is important as culturally reflective trauma-informed programming acknowledges unique challenges faced by Black youth, with consideration for their cultural backgrounds and the impact of systemic racism and exposure to violence on their emotional well-being, including (dis)engagement in their communities (Davis et al., 2017; McCallops et al., 2019; Richardson, 2008; Skinner-Osei et al., 2019; Ticar and Edwards, 2022; Williams et al., 2013; Yancy, 2016). Data was collected between December 2022 to April 2023. 29 surveys and 2 focus groups administered

totalling 55 respondents. Thematic analysis and triangulation of the data contributed to identifying findings.

Although there are many studies examining trauma-informed practices in education and alternative community settings, there are not many examining racialized trauma, specifically within programs offered by non-profit agencies or organizations (Abdul-Adil and Suárez, 2021; Crichlow, 2014; Eizadirad et al., 2022b; Williams et al. 2013). As Abdul-Adil and Suárez (2021) point out, youth exposed to community violence usually experience a myriad of adverse consequences with multiple difficulties reported even among those who are “fortunate” to survive violent exposures and incidents. Traumatic stress, one of the most commonly reported consequences associated with youth exposed to community violence, is particularly prevalent among urban, low-income ethnic minority youth, many of whom are already suffering from significant socio-economic disparities and poly-victimization vulnerabilities.

This is important given that Black youth experience more systemic barriers in their interactions with institutions and exposure to violence and by extension greater inequitable policies and practices (Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, 2019; Maynard, 2022; Williams et al., 2013). As Crichlow (2014) emphasizes, “Structural violence also filters into areas of social service delivery in the form of demand for treatment of psychological disorders (which often go unattended), provision of child protection or custody, and welfare and social programs” (p. 114). Furthermore, COVID-19 school disruptions further intensified systemic disadvantages including racism experienced by Black families and those living in low-income communities (Causadias et al., 2022; Eizadirad and Sider, 2020; Eizadirad et al., 2022b; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Royal Society of Canada, 2021; Toronto Foundation, 2023). In response to such systemic disparities, Black youth require programming that not only addresses their emotional well-being but also acknowledges and embraces their cultural backgrounds and their lived experiences. Culturally reflective, trauma-informed programming can meet the specific needs of Black youth by incorporating cultural relevance, cultural humility (Azzopardi and McNeill, 2016), and trauma-informed care (Gajaria et al., 2021; McCallops et al., 2019). Overall, the research contributes to filling in the research gap in the Canadian context around the importance of culturally reflective, trauma-informed programming for Black youth and how it can foster healthy identity development.

Author Positionalities

Outlining the positionality of the authors in research exploring racialized trauma in youth and young adults from a CRT perspective is crucial to transparently acknowledge the researcher's own social location, biases, and influences (Creswell and Clark, 2017; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The information also provides a contextual understanding of the study's framing (Eizadirad et al., 2022a; Hanna, 2019; Lopez, 2003; Matias,

2016). This transparency enhances the credibility of the research, promoting reflexivity and allowing readers to critically assess how the authors' perspectives shaped the interpretation and analysis of the data, including lived experiences of the youth shared through the surveys and focus groups.

Ardavan Eizadirad (he/him) immigrated to Canada in 1998 as an immigrant from Iran and grew up in Toronto, Canada. His grade 6 teacher, who built a great relationship with him and mentored him to overcome being English as a Second Language learner, pushed him to play basketball as a tool to express his anger and frustrations. Ardavan fell in love with the sport and the life skills and discipline he gained from playing competitive basketball, often outdoors in low-income communities including the Jane and Finch community. Ardavan was connected with many caring adults as his coaches who mentored him with navigating life challenges on and off the basketball court. After high school, Ardavan attended York University, which is in walking proximity adjacent to the Jane and Finch community. At York, he met Dwayne and Joseph the co-founders of Generation Chosen. They all pursued teaching as a career and have kept in touch since through various community projects and activism work. Ardavan is now an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University and continues to lead numerous advocacy campaigns and programming within the Jane and Finch community.

Marcella Bollers (she/they) prefers to go by the name Nawesa. She is of Afro-Guyanese heritage who was born in downtown Toronto. They lived part of their early childhood in Regent Park which historically has been a racialized under-resourced community in downtown Toronto, most recently having gone through gentrification. She later moved to the east end with her family to what is known as the Upper Beaches. They went to school in the east end and recently graduated from the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, specializing in Social Justice and Diversity. The two co-authors met while Ardavan was teaching a graduate course titled "Social Work with Communities and Organizations" in the Social Work program at the University of Toronto. Ardavan approached her to be a Research Assistant on this research project given her lived experiences and skills.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Storytelling

The theoretical framework for this research project is Critical Race Theory (CRT) combined with storytelling (Eizadirad and Wane, 2023; Garo and Lawson, 2019; Solinger et al., 2008; Zarifsanaiey et al., 2022). CRT is a vital lens through which to understand the multifaceted experiences of Black youth in under-resourced communities and the socio-emotional impact of exposure to violence (Dixson and Rousseau, 2016; Gajaria et al., 2021; Leonardo, 2013; Lopez, 2003). As a framework, CRT acknowledges the pervasive influence of anti-Black racism, making connections between how societal structures perpetuate racial disparities in education, opportunity, and social mobility (Blackburn, 2019; Carter and Welner,

2013; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Gorski, 2018; James, 2017). In examining the lives of Black youth, CRT delves beyond individual-level analysis, spotlighting how historical inequities and institutional biases shape daily realities and various magnitudes of disadvantage.

Lopez (2003) outlines that a key characteristic of CRT as,

[T]he privileging of stories and counter-stories particularly the stories that are told by people of color. CRT scholars believe there are two differing accounts of reality: the dominant reality that “looks ordinary and natural” to most individuals, and a racial reality that has been filtered out, suppressed, and censored” (p. 84).

Our research project applies CRT by centring the lived experiences and perspectives of Black youth shared with us through surveys and focus groups. Their embodied experiences at school and in community as well as their emotions during focus groups were documented as important data in how they experienced systemic disadvantage and coped with it. As a collective, by listening and centering narratives of the Black youth, we identified where systemic gaps exist within institutions and how to strategize to advocate for systemic change in ways that would meet their needs individually but also as a community based on where they live which is a low-income community (Abdul-Adil and Suárez, 2021; Crichlow, 2014; Chioneso et al., 2020).

Bowman (2018) argues that human beings need to tell stories to simply be heard and express their concerns. Therefore, in response and in alignment with CRT, the research methodology triangulated data (Creswell and Clark, 2017; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) collected through surveys by creating opportunities for the youth to expand on their stories and lived experiences through focus groups. The intersections of storytelling and CRT provided a framework that acknowledged unique Black lived experiences and emotions as valuable insightful data (Eizadirad and Wane, 2023). It centres their expressions of racialized pain and trauma as counternarratives to dominant discourses proclaimed as neutral and colour-blind under the rhetoric of meritocracy (Davis et al., 2017; Hanna, 2019; Matias, 2016; Yancy, 2016). This is vital to disrupt deficit thinking about Black identities and communities and amplify their concerns for personal and systemic change to meet larger community needs. Overall, CRT seeks to empower marginalized voices and foster critical thinking and activism, aiming not only to analyze, but to catalyze meaningful societal transformation toward equity and justice.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Characteristics of Research Participants

The research project was supported by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and approved by Wilfrid Laurier University’s research ethics board. At the onset of the

project, we met monthly with the leadership team at Generation Chosen which included the co-founders Joseph and Dwayne to co-construct the survey questions and finalize the dates for administration of surveys and focus groups. The goal was to ensure the questions were appropriate and culturally reflective of Black youth experiences. The co-construction of the wording for the questions was intentional to mitigate not triggering past or current traumas being experienced by the participants, and if so, ensure that access to professionals was available on site or afterwards for coping and healing purposes. The Catharsis program ran from September 2022 to April 2023. Data was collected between December 2022 to April 2023 towards the end of each cycle of cohorts attending the program. The survey was administered to participants through Qualtrics, a secure data collection website with servers in Canada. Surveys took approximately 20 minutes to complete. They were completed anonymously by 29 participants and included a combination of open-ended and Likert scale questions. Questions captured demographical data about participants and information about their experiences attending Generation Chosen programs. Data was triangulated by also conducting two focus groups: one in December 2022 with 10 participants and another in April 2023 with 16 participants. Focus groups were done in-person at Emery Collegiate, a high school where the program is offered on weekday evenings. The duration of the focus group was 60 minutes and conducted by the co-authors. In total, 29 surveys were completed as well as 2 focus groups totalling 55 respondents. 15 self-identified as female and 40 as male. The average age of participants was 17 years old predominantly from African Caribbean backgrounds. A \$25 gift card was provided to those who participated in the research as a token of appreciation for their time.

History of the Jane and Finch Community in Toronto Embedded with Systemic Oppression and Neglect

Jane and Finch is a well-known community located in northwest Toronto that is not adequately resourced with opportunities and infrastructure compared to predominantly white and higher socioeconomic status neighbourhoods (Ahmadi, 2018; Eizadirad, 2017; Eizadirad et al., 2022b; Narain, 2012; Richardson, 2008; Williams et al., 2013). Our analysis prioritizes a neighbourhood comparison focusing on the Jane and Finch community as a case study. Gorski (2018) outlines various “dimensions of the educational opportunity gap,” (p. 103) which is helpful to analyze disparities in opportunities amongst schools and communities in different neighbourhoods. Factors for consideration include differences in school funding, availability of resources, student to teacher ratios, opportunities for family involvement, and the extent of access to various technologies.

By extension, we refer to the term “opportunity gap” (Eizadirad et al., 2022b) which refers to the intersection of systemic inequities that create barriers for minoritized identities and communities to access and secure opportunities to achieve their full potential. The opportunity gap can be

compared in terms of individuals, schools, neighbourhoods, regions, or countries. Whereas the achievement gap (Knoester and Au, 2017) examines outcomes on tests as the barometer for identifying the magnitude of inequities in education, the opportunity gap (Colour of Poverty- Colour of Change, 2019; Eizadirad, 2019; James, 2017) provides a more holistic community analysis going beyond the individual realm to explore systemic inequities that serve as barriers impacting student achievement in schools across different social groups (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2013; Carter and Welner, 2013). This community-oriented approach should be prioritized given that “educational disparities and intergenerational economic inequality are highly correlated with skin colour, ethnicity, linguistic and social class status” (Carter and Welner, 2013, p. 1).

Historically and up until now, the Jane and Finch community's identity has been characterized by unemployment, single parent households, and high percentage of racialized peoples which makes it a constant target of stereotypical media portrayals (Ahmadi, 2018; Braganza, 2020; Richardson, 2008; Williams et al., 2013). Newcomers moving into the Jane and Finch community were predominantly from the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, South America, and India (Richardson, 2008). The neighbourhood attracts newcomers and immigrants due to its lower rent and community formation. Initially the land was taken care of by Indigenous Peoples (Downsview Weston Action Community with assistance from York University's Community Relations Department, as cited in Eizadirad, 2017). In the 1400s, through violent means, they were displaced by European settlers. The land was claimed by the Government of Canada and appropriated for different use including accelerated building of apartments to meet housing needs after World War two. As Eizadirad (2017) points out, “This linear style of hollow urban planning, without much thought to the internal infrastructure of the neighbourhood, led to the population of Jane and Finch expanding from 1301 in 1961 to 33,030 in 1971 which included establishment of 21 high-rise apartment buildings” (p. 29). The neighbourhood continued to experience exponential growth into 1970s and 1980s without adequate resources and infrastructure to support the population increase. The lack of alignment between population increase and resources and infrastructure contributed to the rise in unemployment and crime (Ahmadi, 2018; Eizadirad, 2017; Narain, 2012; Richardson, 2008).

Majority of the residents of Jane and Finch continue to be visible minorities, Black, and immigrants (Ahmadi, 2018). The neighbourhood continues to be a site of systemic oppression and institutional abandonment when it comes to adequate resources and infrastructure. Residents continue to experience anti-Black racism, state violence, and oppression which shows up in the forms of inadequate housing, food insecurity, lack of resources, and inequitable social policies (Eizadirad, 2017, Richardson, 2008). State violence in the form of over policing, low wages, unemployment, poverty, and precarious housing are used as tools of

conquest and domination (Narain, 2012; Williams et al., 2013) on the majority Black population to curb their movements and stifle their attempts at upward social mobility. The roots of the problems are in the intergenerational impact of colonization intersecting with poverty, racism, racial/ethnic, and gender inequities (Braganza, 2020; Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, 2019; Gorski, 2018; Government of Canada, 2022). We specially name and emphasize that the current conditions of the Jane and Finch community are largely influenced and driven by white supremacy, anti-Black racism, deficit thinking, and the devaluation of racialized persons (James, 2017; Maynard, 2022; McMurtry and Curling, 2008; Reyes, 2019).

Advocating and Leading with a Purpose: Connecting Youth to Culturally Reflective Programs and Services

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

Developing a trauma-informed programming involves cultivating an environment that recognizes the impact of traumatic childhood experiences while striving for a physically and psychologically safe environment for both youth and staff in detention...[T]rauma-informed care [TIC] is an evidence-based practice that teaches service providers and their organizations about the triggers and vulnerabilities of trauma survivors and employs effective interventions to treat traumatic responses. TIC involves understanding, anticipating, and responding to peoples' expectations and needs, and minimizing the chances of re-traumatizing someone who is trying to heal. (pp. 10-11)

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

The proposed research focused on Generation Chosen's trauma-informed Catharsis program. The program is geared towards providing youth and young adults with the necessary soft skills to navigate their way through adverse emotional disturbances and their interpersonal relationships that are fraught with psycho-social tensions. For those seeking therapeutic support, the program offers free therapy sessions with a wide

range of therapy streams and options, including art therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Participants in the program are predominantly Black and live in the Jane and Finch community. Through weekly programming led by Black mentors, the youth use their voice and agency to share their narratives reflecting their identities and lived experiences.

Emerging Themes from Surveys and Focus Groups

Responses from surveys and focus groups were examined by the core research team using CRT as a paradigm and thematic analysis as a methodology (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The research team read the focus group transcripts and survey responses to identify codes. Codes included keywords such as trauma, violence, stress, supports, mentorship, and caring adults. Related codes were then grouped to formulate more prominent themes that aligned with key trends identified in the literature review (e.g., coping with trauma, mentorship, culturally reflective programming, mental health, violence, etc.). The narratives expressed by the Black youth helped identify characteristics of effective programming and what is supporting them to heal from trauma and cope with community violence.

Theme #1: Increased confidence and engagement due to access to culturally reflective programming.

The survey and focus group responses from the Generation Chosen participants underscore the profound impact of culturally reflective programming on their confidence and engagement. One respondent highlighted the importance of learning about “the economy of the society and the difference between rich and wealthy people,” emphasizing the empowering effect of practical content delivered in culturally relevant ways easy to understand. This sentiment reflects the transformative influence of programming tailored to the participants' cultural context contributing to their personal growth and sense of empowerment. Another respondent expressed how for the first time they learned about “Black mental health and emotional intelligence” indicating the value of programming that addresses culturally relevant topics rooted in the Black experience, further enhancing the participants' engagement and connection to the content and their community.

Applying CRT, learning to talk about mental health not as a taboo topic is very important, given that Black youth face a range of challenges including discrimination, racial profiling, cultural disconnection through omission of their cultures in the school curriculum, adultification, harsher punishments, school suspension and/or expulsion (Abudiab et al., 2023; Colour of Poverty- Colour of Change, 2019; Maynard, 2002). These experiences can have a profound impact on their emotional well-being leading to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Gajaria et al., 2021; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Garo and Lawson, 2019; McCallops et al., 2021; Royal Society of Canada, 2021; Toronto Foundation, 2023). Moreover, the lack of representation and culturally

relevant resources further exacerbates their feelings of isolation and marginalization (Eizadirad, 2023; James, 2017; Maynard, 2022). Recognizing and addressing these challenges is crucial to supporting their emotional healing and healthy identity development. By being able to talk about such issues, and discuss the root causes associated with systemic oppression, it shifts the conversation from blaming individuals or communities as the causes of such issues.

It is important that Catharsis programming is intentional in being accessible and meeting the youth where they are based on their unique socio-emotional needs (Azzopardi and McNeill, 2016; Braganza, 2020; Imad, 2020). As one participant stated outlining the benefits of the Catharsis program, they “learned to love themselves”. Another respondent stated, “Catharsis is a program that focuses on issues unique to racialized youth. Activities, discussions, and excursions are developed around the areas of mental health, emotional intelligence, financial literacy, and relationships”. Finally, another participant explained that it is a “safe space where you can be vulnerable. They do not judge you and you can talk about issues that impact you”.

Culturally reflective programming incorporates culturally relevant content, activities, and approaches that resonate with the experiences of Black youth. It helps create a safer and inclusive environment where participants feel understood, not judged, valued, and supported. Generation Chosen begins this process by acknowledging participants for who they are and creating discussion topics that relate to their lived experiences and neighbourhood conditions. But they are also intentional with creating opportunities that may not be afforded to the participants such as teaching them about financial literacy, what is debt and how it relates to one's credit score, taking the youth camping out of the city, and supporting them to start their own businesses. By recognizing and addressing cultural nuances rooted in mitigating the opportunity gap through experiential learning, Catharsis fosters a sense of belonging and cultural identity, leading to improved emotional well-being. Incorporating culturally specific mental health practices such as meditation or traditional healing methods (e.g., djembe drumming, dance, healing circles, storytelling) enhanced emotional regulation and stress management among Black youth. This aligns with cultural practices such as Rites of Passage and appreciating the knowledge shared by elders, which are common rituals within many Black cultures and traditions. Generation Chosen provides Black youth the space to feel supported, protected, valued, and their ideas deemed important. Youth are “given space to be themselves and this makes it feel more of a community.” The organization also connects participants with mental health providers that have community connections and similar in race and culture. They are no costs associated with seeing the healthcare provider regarding their mental health and there are different types of therapies available.

By developing emotional intelligence, Black youth can better navigate their emotions, cope with stress and community violence, and

build healthier relationships. This contributes to safer communities through better relationships. It also facilitates the youth becoming advocates for themselves, others, and their community (Skinner-Osei et al., 2019). Incorporating cultural elements such as language, art, music, and storytelling within programs can be a powerful tool for fostering emotional intelligence and healing. Many participants stated in the focus group and surveys that Generation Chosen “teaches life skills”, “they talk to you on your level”, “provide resources we need” (e.g., mental health services), “being acknowledged” and “they model the application of emotional intelligence into real world scenarios”. The integration of these strategies in programming has been influential in improving mental health of Black youth participants.

Theme #2: Relatable staff creating brave/safer spaces by modelling vulnerability and managing stress.

The survey and focus group responses emphasized the significant role of relatable staff in creating brave and safer spaces for the participants. As one respondent expressed, “The staff are great as well the people that attend, and all the food and services they provide are great too,” highlighting the positive impact of supportive and relatable staff members. This underscores the importance of staff who model vulnerability and provide guidance on managing stress, fostering an environment where participants feel understood, not judged, supported, and empowered to discuss how they feel as part of navigating personal and community challenges. Additionally, another respondent mentioned how programming has become a medium to “make new friends” reflecting an environment conducive to building meaningful connections and a sense of community. Relatable staff, through their embodiment of vulnerability (Eizadirad et al., 2022a), cultivate an environment that champions authenticity. Their transparency demonstrates healthy coping mechanisms and resilience (Chioneso et al., 2020; Generation Chosen, 2024). This modelling not only normalizes vulnerability but empowers youth to navigate their own challenges. Witnessing such authenticity fosters trust and encourages dialogue and a sense of safety in expressing emotions and seeking support. Through this relational framework, staff inspire an ethos of self-care and empathy, shaping a sanctuary where individuals flourish by learning about and being equipped with the tools to confront their stressors with courage. They also become self-advocates for themselves and the issues impacting their community (Anucha et al., 2017; Bailey et al., 2023; Blackburn, 2019; Day et al., 2016).

Catharsis programming encouraged youth to develop a deeper understanding of their emotions and how to navigate the pressures they feel to conform (Brandford, 2020; Eizadirad et al., 2022a). In the focus groups, youth shared that being in the Generation Chosen program “feels like at home,” which can be attributed to the youth belonging to the “same ethnicity as staff.” The youth also stated that “they can relate to each other

because they came from the same neighbourhood”. This indicates that coming from the same neighbourhood allowed staff and youth to make a connection and develop trust over time due to common experiences with systemic barriers such as exposure to violence (Crichlow, 2014). Further, Black youth appreciated that the staff “talked to them rather than talking down to them”.

Generation Chosen also ensured that the youth have access to social workers and therapists free of cost. This is significant given that most people do not share personal matters with someone unless they have built some trust and relationship with them. At Generation Chosen, they work on building that relationship through programming from week to week which includes providing food and leadership by racialized staff modelling Black excellence and being vulnerable with the challenges they experience and how they handle it. For example, youth in the focus group and surveys expressed how they know “lots of people who went to jail or have gotten shot” which the staff could relate to. Another participant expressed that with the help of a social worker, they “learned how to talk about feelings within the span of a year and articulate feelings without feeling anxiety”. Another respondent expressed that “before I used to overreact and now I am more calm”. Others benefitted from working with a social worker by explaining how they “learned about the importance of talking about their feelings and how to express themselves” and “now able to talk about issues that impact us.” As one participant put it, “I don’t feel safe going to my parents or even discussing certain issues with my friends, but I can talk to staff in the program.” Another youth stated that, it “feels like a family in terms of how welcoming they are and supportive”.

Overall, many respondents reiterated that having “mentors and leaders who are Black helps build relationships” where they “do not feel judged in this space”. This allowed them as a collective to have discussions about issues that impact them and their community such as violence, racism, mental health, trauma, and how to “disrupt toxic masculinity”. The youth expressed how they can show up and engage with staff and peers as their authentic selves without masking parts of their identity or their emotions. By including community members as mentors or facilitators, programming provided role models who share similar cultural backgrounds, reinforcing positive emotional and cultural development. By validating their cultural identities and experiences, programming helped Black youth build a healthy self-concept and strengthen their sense of belonging. By recognizing the prevalence of trauma and its effects, programming provided the necessary tools and support for participants to process and heal from traumatic experiences (Alvarez, 2020; Anucha et al., 2017; Barnes, 2019; Gajaria et al., 2021; Jones and Boufard, 2012). This includes creating safer spaces for expression, promoting self-care practices, and fostering connections with mental health professionals.

Theme #3: Strengthening cultural connections by creating access to opportunities beyond the neighbourhood.

Responses from research participants also emphasized the importance of strengthening cultural connections and creating access to opportunities as part of their growth and identity-development journey. One participant noted that “It allows us to meet a lot of new people that come with connections and gives us the opportunity to experience real-life scenarios,” highlighting the transformative impact of access to opportunities in fostering cultural connections and personal growth. This underscores the significance of initiatives that provide avenues for participants to build meaningful connections within their community and access resources and experiential opportunities beyond their physical neighbourhood. This contributed to the participants’ personal and professional development. Another respondent mentioned, “The overnight camp,” indicating the value of opportunities such as camps in providing enriching experiences for the participants.

One of the primary benefits of culturally reflective programming is its ability to strengthen cultural connections among Black youth (Chioneso et al., 2020; Ticar and Edwards, 2022; Zarifsanaiey et al., 2022). Many young individuals experience a disconnection from their cultural heritage and lineage due to external pressures or a lack of culturally responsive environments in schools or within their neighbourhood. By incorporating cultural elements into programming at Generation Chosen, Black youth are encouraged to explore and celebrate their identities, histories, and who they are, fostering a sense of pride and belonging (Eizadirad and Wane, 2023). This reconnection can significantly impact their emotional well-being and provide a foundation for personal growth. For example, some of the young women expressed that the program “teaches you to love yourself”. For one of their weekly activities, they wrote a letter to themselves and read it a year later. The program aimed to empower them by teaching essential life skills and knowledge such as financial literacy, entrepreneurship, guidance for pursuing post-secondary education, and opportunities for enriching experiences like overnight camping. Participants emphasized how “engaging in sports developed communication skills and accountability,” “Trips (e.g., camping or a cottage experience) were very memorable,” “Scholarships (\$500 for awards and \$1000 for scholarships) and the business plan (competition to pitch your idea and if you win you get amount of \$10,000)” were insightful and engaging. Overall, many felt that such opportunities and experiences were all things they value and wish they would experience more often as part of their regular schooling experiences.

Culturally reflective, trauma-informed programming served as a catalyst fortifying cultural connections among Black youth by offering transformative access to experiential learning opportunities (Lynn-Whaley, 2017; McCallops et al., 2019; Zarifsanaiey et al., 2022). This approach acknowledges and respects diverse backgrounds while addressing trauma with empathy and care. By intertwining cultural elements into

programming, they become not just avenues for growth, but gateways to empowerment. Through tailored support and understanding, these initiatives instil a sense of belonging, unlocking doors to education, mentorship, and resources otherwise inaccessible. As youth engage with these programs such as Catharsis, they discover avenues for personal and collective advancement, cultivating pride in their heritage, while forging pathways toward a future where cultural identity is celebrated and a source of strength (Generation Chosen, 2024; Eizadirad et al., 2022a).

Recommendations

The recommendations outlined reflect what the Black youth voiced as next steps for improvements for their community to meet their personal and collective needs. From a community lens and in relation to the opportunity gap, focus group participants stated that the government and schools should have more “financial literacy,” “programs that address the root causes of poverty,” “make it easier for Blacks to get jobs”, and “have more representation at various levels of government”. In addition, respondents stated there should be “more programs such as Catharsis that are affordable and accessible,” and “expansion of the program to different areas in the city.” Survey respondents stated that to heal from trauma, they would need additional supports such as “anger management,” “religious places for practice, healing, and guidance,” “mentors to teach youth to do the right things,” “better community centre programs and services,” “more teams or clubs at school,” and “better teachers as current teachers are more about the hustle than the needs of the students.”

The insights and recommendations shared shed light on the pressing need for government support to foster their emotional growth and wellbeing. The participants stressed the importance of empowering their communities and addressing the systemic issues they are experiencing such as violence and trauma. One notable suggestion included the government investing sufficient resources and long-term sustainable financial support for low-income neighbourhoods. This resonated with the idea that youth and community members often possess creative solutions, but the resources necessary to bring these solutions to life are limited. The respondents emphasized the need for comprehensive programming that offers a wide range of experiences, from teaching life skills like financial literacy and entrepreneurship, to creating safer spaces for young individuals to seek guidance and support. It was clear that overall the recommendations aimed to break the cycle of blame and deficit thinking projected onto the community and instead championed empowering solutions that align with the lived experiences and needs of the youth themselves.

Participants also advocated for a curriculum that includes Indigenous and Black perspectives, moving beyond superficial acknowledgments of Black history and land acknowledgements. They emphasized the importance of culturally reflective services and programs led by a diverse staff with lived experiences. Additionally, they highlighted

the significance of accessible programs, ideally offered at minimal or no cost, to reach those living in poverty or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Also, the notion of community organizations working more effectively with schools to offer youth programming and family supports on evenings and weekends emerged as a crucial element to create and sustain continuity of care for residents relative to the systemic barriers they are impacted by. Ultimately, the recommendations called for a more comprehensive, empathetic, and long-term community-oriented approach to addressing systemic barriers and inequities impacting their community while advocating for tailored supports for their individual needs and wellbeing.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Black youth face systemic challenges related to intergenerational trauma and anti-Black racism which have long-lasting effects on their mental health. Culturally reflective programming that incorporates trauma-informed approaches and recognizes the impact of trauma, at the personal and community level, can be critical in helping youth navigate the challenges they experience as part of their identity development. By integrating culturally meaningful healing practices such as storytelling, art therapy, and community engagement, Catharsis cultivates safer spaces and facilitates greater access to experiential opportunities and mental health supports to support Black youth (Sangalang et al., 2020). Additionally, such initiatives foster leadership skills, critical thinking, and social advocacy, empowering youth to address systemic issues and initiate positive change within their communities. Also, culturally reflective, trauma-informed programming often incorporates mentorship and role modelling as key components. Having mentors who share similar cultural backgrounds and have succeeded, despite experiencing risk factors and systemic oppression, provides youth with guidance, support, and inspiration.

As we move forward, it is crucial to continue developing and implementing culturally reflective, trauma-informed programming to empower Black youth and promote their well-being to mitigate anti-Black racism and other forms of oppression experienced by under-resourced communities. Black youth often experience cultural disconnection which can significantly impact their emotional well-being. By acknowledging and embracing their cultural identities, experiences, and emotions culturally reflective programming provides a platform for personal growth and character development.

Future studies should consider broader and more extensive approaches to address multifaceted challenges faced by Black youth. Studies should aim for larger sample sizes and longitudinal research to track progress and wellbeing over extended periods, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of experiences of Black youth living in low-income communities. It is crucial to explore school-community partnerships and synergies that can better support these young individuals.

Additionally, a comparative lens should be applied by conducting studies across various neighbourhoods to identify region-specific dynamics and disparities in access to opportunities (e.g., amongst race, socio-economic status, gender, etc). As a collective, these considerations are vital not only at the local level, but also on a national and international scale, to develop holistic strategies that support the emotional growth and well-being of Black youth and communities.

Informed Consent

Provided to the youth as research participants.

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Conflict of Interest

None to declare

Author Contribution Statements

Ardavan Eizadirad was the lead on the research project. Nawesa Bollers was the main research assistant.

Ethics Approval

The research project was approved by Wilfrid Laurier University's research ethics board

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