Reimagining Educational Success: Lessons on Support, Wellbeing, and Trust from Community-Grounded Research with Black Families and Gender-Diverse Youth

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Abstract

We present a dialogue between two community-based scholars in Tio'tia:ke/Montréal, who are examining the experiences of low-income Black families and youth, and gender-diverse, homeless youth. We argue that success must be understood differently in light of the systemic discrimination many youth navigate in schools and explore how research may mirror experiences of discrimination and lack of access that youth navigate in schools. The article highlights how relational research approaches may provide lessons for supporting youth and community leadership and posits that we must foster deep practices of trust-building, shared aims for research impact, and trust in youth.

Introduction

This article explores questions of how young people we work with—Black youth from low-income families (Tanya) and gender-diverse, precariously housed youth (Jayne) in Tio'tia:ke/Montréal—navigate institutions of education that, often, fail to support their success and wellbeing. Our conversation(s) show our mutual interest, curiosity, and passion for conducting impactful research that employs methods that ensure our research is grounded in cultural sensitivity, safety, and authenticity. We draw from our lived experiences navigating the education system and offer insight into challenges and barriers that parents, children, and loved ones from vulnerable communities may face with navigating institutions of learning. We reflect from our roles as professionals within these communities to outline barriers and points of potential action for fostering wellbeing and learning. This represents ongoing work we undertake together as two researchers who have navigated first-hand some of the very educational barriers we study. We highlight challenges, lessons, and themes across our respective projects to explore how experiences between communities illuminate a persistent lack of access for some youth and their families. In our respective and collective roles, we draw from our lived, professional, and academic knowledge to support young people to access learning in the ways they need to and, more importantly, thrive in the learning environments of their choosing. In this article, we aim to offer insight into how community-grounded research findings and approaches illuminate the potential for broader educational reimagination with youth currently underserved by schools, across communities and in solidarity. In our collaborations and research, we have found ourselves returning to the persistent question: How is it that schools continue to fail many youth in their educational pathways, and how is this manifesting in new and compounding ways? The dialogue presented in this paper extends this question to ask:

1) What does educational success mean to us and our communities?

2) How can the lessons we have garnered in our respective roles point to ways to reimagine learning for young people who are underserved by current education structures?

3) How can we learn from the differences and similarities across communities to act on structures of educational injustice?

Across these questions, which also guide our dialogue as we reflect upon the research generated from these lines of inquiry, we try to keep youth agency and leadership at the forefront—even as we are two adults discussing the topic. We hope to highlight the responsibility of adults like ourselves—educators, community supports, researchers, parents, aunties, uncles, mentors, and professionals working with youth—to listen to young people, show up with humility, and act for educational change. We highlight the role of community, families, and connection in facilitating support for young learners, while exploring the harmful ways that educational institutions, often, define success. Our respective community-based research activities show us one way that research can be not only a means to understand the "how" of connection-building for youth but also a tool to directly foster capacity, engagement, and access in itself. While there is an understandable and warranted mistrust of research in the respective communities we work with (e.g. Scharff et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2022), we ultimately argue that respectful, reciprocal, and sustained research can provide a powerful model toward understanding and acting on educational injustices that impact youth, including Black youth, gender-diverse youth, and precariously housed or low-income youth.

Methodological Grounding and Context: Reflection as Feminist Process and Praxis

I begin in authenticity—I share and tell a bit of my own story, always. Who I am, where I came from, and why I believe my research is important and useful, why I think it will also *benefit* these families and the community. When I share where I am coming from, they can *empathise* with me, and understand why I do this work. We get on the same page and highlight our similarities as people. People may not always express it, but I can tell with the way they communicate with me, you can see it. You know when you've passed the test, and they trust you because you are authentic and vulnerable, and you show that you want to make changes because you have experienced some of the same things. They know some very personal things that have happened in your life too. (Tanya)

This article is grounded in our methodological commitment to transparency, curiosity, and reflection as educators and researchers who work with young people. We aim to embody what Tanya states above, sharing our vulnerability and process not only as people who navigated educational barriers ourselves but as researchers who continue to act and learn to undertake educational justice research with young people in our communities. In a feminist commitment to honoring everyday experience as important knowledge to understand the social organization of our lives (Smith, 1990), we also realize this requires ongoing reflection, and learning across communities and perspectives—this is what we aim to do here.

We believe that making visible the processes, reflections, and questions of doing this work is an educational opportunity in itself.

Tanya's work is undertaken in deep connection with the community in Tio'tia:ke/Montréal. It is done in collaboration with different organizations that serve low-income families, and while her partnerships hold a specific focus on Black families, children, and youth, she sees that these organizations often serve many intersecting communities: first-generation families, people who have come to Canada from different territories, and those navigating immigration status. Jayne draws from their work with youth and young adults navigating housing precarity, where they explore the educational trajectories and formal/informal needs of youth—many of whom are queer and trans, as this community is overrepresented in populations of youth experiencing homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016). We are both researchers, have worked as educators across formal and informal learning spaces, and have first-hand experience of educational barriers in our own trajectories—and necessarily act as researchers with this lived knowledge.

This article emerges from everyday conversations we have had, and continue to have, with each other around our roles as researchers in communities where we felt we existed both as members and as learners. We discuss how we see potential in community-based research methods to organize unique opportunities for learning, both in the insights they offer and the immediate bonds they can foster. As two researchers who faced educational barriers ourselves, we found ourselves seeing opportunities in the relational and non-hierarchical ways that our projects approach knowledge, showing how education can be a tool to serve the community rather than an institution of harm. We do not wish to argue that the barriers facing these communities are the same, but through putting our perspectives and work in dialogue, we wish to illuminate how the same systems can organize barriers across communities—even if they manifest in different ways, arguing that this provides a starting point to imagine educational shifts that support all learners, better.

To reimagine sustainable approaches to the wellbeing of youth through research, our approaches draw on calls for strong relationships of solidarity and trust with young people themselves (Bergman, 2022), as well as their families, support systems, and communities. This stance hopes to disrupt top-down approaches to supporting youth that have long dominated many spaces of youth work (Ramey et al., 2017). Youth work happening in and outside of schools is persistently grounded in paternalistic and deficit-based approaches (Coffey, 2022), assuming that others know best what youth (and their families) need to achieve success. Rather, in our research and educational work, we wish to highlight the ways we have witnessed and experienced success when actions are grounded in what young people know (e.g. Malenfant et al., 2023). If the research we undertake is contributing to negative experiences for youth, and invisibilizing their expertise about their own realities, it is already failing to have an impact in young people's lives. We believe this stance necessarily involves deep and ongoing reflection and continuous learning, which we undertake with each other here. While our research occupies different disciplines, and often encompasses diverse (albeit, at times, intersecting) communities, we present these reflections in conversation with one another as this is representative of how we undertake our community-based research: in collaboration, in solidarity, and with the goal of addressing the overarching structural and systemic access barriers that impact many diverse youth.

What Does Educational Success Mean in Our Communities? Navigating Lack of Access, Wellbeing, and Institutional Education

We have experienced how, even within communities that seem homogenous (which may come to be known institutionally as Black youth, gender-diverse youth, or precarious youth), providing supports that foster the unique needs and agency of each learner can be a powerful tool for wellbeing and educational success. Educational success in our communities requires naming, combatting, and shifting systemic discrimination that youth navigate in their daily lives, connecting their individual experiences to the overarching systems that shape them. Despite facing a consistent lack of support and disproportionate punishment in mainstream schooling, Black youth are often highly motivated and invested in education (Livingstone et al., 2014), including post-secondary (Turcotte, 2020). Gender-diverse youth face barriers to accessing education as well, including regular experiences of transphobia from peers and teachers (Peter et al., 2021). Youth facing housing precarity are eight times more likely to be pushed out of schools, often contributing to lifelong cycles of precarity (Gaetz et al., 2016). Youth and families we work with are navigating intersecting and complex barriers to access institutions which are often not organized in ways that honor, represent, or recognize their experiences or knowledge (Plamenig, 2022; Plaster, 2012).

Tensions between understanding community and individual needs, supporting learners today while imagining new futures for learners, and balancing difference, similarity, and solidarity continue to shape and inform our work as individual researchers/educators and collaborators. One way we have explored this is through beginning in our own experiences, practice, collaborations with community, presenting emergent themes to explore the overarching systems that shape what impedes "success" for youth we work with. Through putting our work in dialogue, we hope to continue understanding how institutions face challenges in fostering the educational success of some young learners and, further, fail to understand the realities of youth who may not fit normative standards of what they imagine students to be—standards which are grounded in White supremacy, colonial frameworks, ableism, transphobia, and classism. We see our research—anchored in strong relationships of trust with community, beginning in our own experiences and those of people we love, and dedicated to action—as holding commonalities for thinking globally about how to sustainably support youth (and community) wellbeing. When we work in these ways, we collectively embody different possible ways of organizing relationships and learning, fostering opportunities to radically imagine new futures of educational success (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). We acknowledge that there is still work to be done to foster a relationship and understanding between the community and the schools. The following sections include quotes from our conversations that highlight challenges and barriers individuals continue to face which can hinder educational success.

What Impedes Success Today: Feeling Judgment and Discrimination

Educational institutions often don't understand the learning practices of youth, nor their needs or the needs of their families. Parents often share feelings of judgment because of how they may differently teach their children literacy and language at home, which may not reflect normative ideas of literacy in a Canadian context. This leads to complex barriers because parents feel both as if their children are not prepared for school settings and that their knowledge and pedagogical approaches are not valued.

Additionally, Black youth and communities face a disproportionate amount of prejudice, as evidenced by extensive historical and contemporary discrimination based on race in a Canadian context (Codjoe, 2001; Maynard, 2017). These everyday experiences of racism and dehumanization (Grace-Williams, 2021) in their everyday navigation of school environments contributes to barriers to access and success for Black youth that Tanya works with. This discrimination extends to perceptions of capability—in contrast (and in addition) to failing to access diagnoses that may support their learning. Black students also face assumptions about their capabilities and intelligence, at times being misdiagnosed by educators in ways that put them at a disadvantage (Balde et al., 2011). Black families and youth in Montreal who are navigating immigration (Shizha et al., 2020) often face compounding institutional discrimination. The following quote, from a dialogue we undertook in preparing this reflection, is typical of the institutional experiences Tanya hears about in her work with community, wherein professionals, youth, and families share feelings of over and insidious discrimination when trying to access educational resources. Often, families don't feel like schools are "on their side":

> One employee from the community centre shared with me that a parent tried to call the school to enrol her child, and the parent had an accent. The person on the phone just dismissed her and wouldn't give her any information about the school. So, she got this same employee, who was a white woman, to call. And she got so much more information. I really think that the person on the phone heard an accent, assuming an immigrant, assuming no value, not intellectual. But then this person calls who sounds just like the person on the phone, and that person already has value. And information is given freely. (Tanya)

Youth that Jayne works with also share that they navigate everyday experiences of discrimination in schools. Gender diverse youth—including Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary youth—regularly face harassment in school environments, with 74% of trans students reporting verbal harassment in schools based on their gender expression (Peter et al., 2021). In North American studies, over half of 2SLGBTIA+ youth have reported feeling unsafe at school (GLSEN, 2021) and one quarter of trans students had faced physical violence in schools (NCTQ, 2016).

> With the new policies coming in,[1] it's telling trans kids that they don't have a safe place anymore in schools, if they ever did. Some young people I work with don't have a safe place at home, they face transphobia there. A lot of youth talk about having to make the decision between being well, being authentically themselves, or being safe, hiding who they are, and accessing shelter, and education. It's so much work for them, in a system that already wasn't supporting them enough. (Jayne)

In Jayne's work with youth, youth share that anti-trans discrimination permeates school experiences and shapes access to healthcare, housing, and criminal-legal systems. Youth often employ strategic attempts to hide their gender identities or "pass" as cisgender. For professionals working with gender-diverse communities, inclusion or equity training on gender may make up a single professional development day, and professionals often lack the knowledge to adequately support Two-Spirit, trans, or non-binary youth (Nelson et al., 2022). Some families may struggle to support their children through trans-exclusive institutional pathways, or may be an additional source of experiences of discrimination for youth (Abreu et al., 2022). At times, gender-diverse youth may not feel safe or cannot stay with their families due to discrimination and violence, leading to an overrepresentation in groups experiencing youth

homelessness (Abramovich et al., 2022). Youth that Jayne works with describe discrimination, a lack of understanding from professionals and staff, and instability, as well as the need to put in substantial labor to meet everyday wellbeing, as detracting from their capacity to find success in school environments. Success defined in any way is difficult to achieve when navigating these multiple, and often compounding, experiences.

Both of us also witness how families are facing accessibility challenges in terms of getting help their children and youth may need academically. Learning differences, and diagnoses of learning disabilities, often hold a complex role in accessing supports at school, providing institutionally legible documentation that a learner may need additional supports or considerations in their schooling (Nichols, 2019). In Tanya's work, families hold an assumption that their child has a learning disability or recognize that their child may learn differently, but due to a lack of knowledge, information, support, and affordable diagnosis options, many youth are not receiving the support they need. In Jayne's work, youth mention misdiagnoses, a lack of access to diagnoses, or an absence of tailored supports without official documentation to justify them. Another barrier outlined by gender-diverse youth is a need to have parents (who may not always have the knowledge to understand or support diverse gender expression [Airton et al., 2023]) to approve access to mental health diagnoses, learning disability diagnoses, or interventions, often preventing youth from accessing supports before moments of crisis, educational disengagement, or housing precarity (Nichols & Malenfant, 2021; Parodi et al., 2022).

How can lessons from our research point to ways to reimagine learning for young people who are underserved by current education structures?

> You can't go in as a researcher and just be doing the same harm these youth see in their lives, in schools. Research can't just replicate that. It can't say, "We know better than you about your own life." (Jayne)

> There has to be open communication; youth have to feel seen, feel like they can trust you, and that you will listen. If research does it differently, then why can't schools go into the communities differently? We can ask, "Why does it have to be like this?" (Tanya)

One lesson we have shared across our roles as researchers is the regularity with which people refer to the connectedness between community and individual wellness. Youth share positive experiences when they are surrounded by multiple levels of access to support and when those around them are well. Tanya has witnessed the positive impact on community wellness (as opposed to narrow, individualized notions of being "well" [Smythe, 2022]) when there are strong organizations that are adaptive to the needs of a given community, and academic success is taken on collectively. Fostering strong relationships between schools and community has been demonstrated to support Black learners in Canadian schools (Sefa Dei, 2008). Tanya notes that community hubs are particularly impactful for fostering these connections, especially when they are funded, publicized (e.g. families and youth know about them), and address multiple needs of young people and their families (e.g., education, access to services, cultural and spiritual supports). However, she has also witnessed that in Montreal, these organizations are not always available or accessible in every neighborhood or for every community. Churches and community centers may play this role, fostering education and connection in the Black community. While research may not

always play a role in these hubs, Tanya has seen how a resourced researcher who is engaged in reciprocal community learning can provide additional supports for participants, and that when a community hub is flourishing, the stability of the community follows.

Jayne has also witnessed the power that community can hold for gender-diverse youth navigating educational disengagement and precarity. Often, this necessarily draws on notions of chosen family or peer groups (Cruz, 2014; VanMeeter, 2023), where connecting and learning with peers is undertaken as a strategy by gender-diverse and precariously housed youth in the absence of access to support or education within formal institutions (Malenfant et al., 2023). Spaces of support where gender-diverse young people do not have to hide their gender expression to access education or services (Nelson et al., 2022) provide room for youth to foster stability and wellbeing and shape their own educational trajectories. While navigating schooling, many youth and their support systems talk about being mentally exhausted. Significant labor is required to constantly navigate systems that not only fail to support their educational success and wellbeing but actively cause harm in their lives. For both the Black youth that Tanya works with and the gender-diverse youth that Jayne works with, not being able to meet financial needs is a significant hindrance to wellbeing, as well as educational access. One lesson research can tangibly offer in this regard is funds, capacity, and resources. Organizations that provide essential connection and services, especially organizations led by Black communities and 2SLGBTIA+ communities, are persistently underfunded (Nelson et al., 2022). Academic projects can bring additional funds, personnel, and support to organizations (Nichols, 2021).

Community connections, including with researchers from a shared community (Nelson, 2021), may be a way to disrupt internalized blame and recenter cultural knowledge, fostering diverse pathways to educational success and providing material and educational support where useful. Tanya sees an ongoing and strong lack of trust of researchers in families and youth she works with, indicative of broader historical and current trends of warranted mistrust of research and academic institutions in Black communities (Scharff et al., 2010). Jayne has also witnessed a mistrust of both research and institutional responses with youth with whom they undertake research (Malenfant et al., 2023). We recognize and understand this mistrust and know that research often remains a tool that invisibilizes, abstracts, or speaks on behalf of youth and underserved communities. We share aspects of our own experiences with youth and families, not to erase these legacies of research harm but to demonstrate why we are compelled to do research that is grounded in care and action. We share our own hope for the potential research may hold for mobilizing community knowledge to inform potential ways forward in education and wellbeing for youth. We see trust-building as an integral method to support effective research for fostering youth wellbeing and echo literature calling for meaningful relationships built between researchers and youth over time (Ramey et al., 2017), grounded in reciprocity and action (Akom et al., 2008) and the flattening of knowledge hierarchies (Frederick et al., 2018). Research can be powerful when used in service of the community, with youth being understood as integral, important, and active members of those communities and the development of research knowledge. We draw on community-based participatory research and youth participatory action research methodologies and recognize that many before us have mobilized these as a tool for community action (Israel et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2016).

We have also noted that the potential benefits of research in the community may be deeply related to how much researchers can show up in ongoing and long-term ways, building trust, respect, and reciprocity over time—though this is not often how research is organized in academic institutions (Chatterton et al., 2010). However, there are ways to foster these bonds in the meantime while we are advocating for long-term funding of research relationships. Tanya highlights the ways that fostering wellness in phases of data collection and collaboration can include ensuring that researchers are not violating the rules and expectations of a community space, including people's homes. While we wish to highlight the potential solidarity that can be built through sharing, we also think that the power dynamics inherent in research relationships should impact how sharing takes place, with ongoing check-ins necessary to be mindful of when, how, and how much to share. There is power that comes from shared experiences between researchers and the community, but we must keep in view how important it is to be honest about the limitations of academic research for fostering immediate change and be transparent about our own realities/limitations as researchers, and our intentions for the work. We see youth as key actors in the creation of research communities—not as those research should be imposed on (Ramey et al., 2017) or necessarily a subject of inclusion. We advocate that research projects that want to use the knowledge of communities to change systems must exist outside of narrow institutional definitions of research practices, which often mirror the discrimination, limitations, and paternalistic experiences that youth navigate in their lives—and that we also navigated in our own educational trajectories

While we argue that research can serve as a tool for supporting wellbeing, learning, and action, it has often done the opposite (Mirra et al., 2016). We use research cautiously, knowing that research methods, paradigms, and outputs are often discriminatory in themselves. We are wary of research empowerment narratives, both with youth and communities that are deemed voiceless or disenfranchised (Baroutsis et al., 2016). We know that those we work with have strong voices and are actively navigating systems that fail to support them. We return here to our grounding in methodologies that do not require researchers to be separate from the social issues they are studying, adhering instead to notions of "strong objectivity" rooted in feminist or Marxist theory (Au, 2018)—our own experiences, in conversation with the lived experiences of those we work with, provide objective knowledge about how systems are organized every day (Smith, 1990). When we enter research spaces and share experiences we have had navigating similar issues in schooling, we are not only building trust to facilitate research, but we are also actively addressing power dynamics that have shaped how research can be useful to communities that it has historically harmed (Scharff et al., 2010). We draw from our pedagogical approaches and philosophies to undertake research for the transformation of relationships and spaces. In schools, bell hooks (1994) argues:

> Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive . . . . I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. (p. 21)

In this, we can follow a philosophy to building spaces of learning—including in research—which frame reciprocal sharing of experiences as a key practice for both building knowledge and disrupting coercive power dynamics. Why should we expect youth to share in ways that we would not?

How can we learn from the differences and similarities across communities to *act* on structures of educational injustice?

There is a need for adults working to support the educational success of youth (including educators, researchers, and community supports) to engage with and come into spaces with curiosity, humility, and an openness to learn the difference—qualities that are often not resourced or valued in current spaces of learning. The devaluation of these forms of relating is part of what upholds systems organizing schools but are, often, not named by those in power (Smythe, 2022): systems of white supremacy, neoliberalism, capitalism, settler colonialism, ableism, and cis-normativity. From both of our lived, professional and research perspectives, we view school non-completion as one aspect of illuminating a larger system of environmental factors, interpersonal and community relationships, and institutional racism, transphobia, and discrimination. We have both experienced and witnessed how focusing on the behaviors, challenges, or actions which are visible in an educational setting may misrepresent the reality that a young person is navigating. For example, in Jayne's research, many young people are punished for poor attendance; youth have specified, however, that this is often a survival strategy to avoid daily discrimination or disproportionate punishment from staff. In Tanya's work, this may appear as families "choosing" to pick schools that are seen as less prestigious, misinterpreted as less investment in quality education while, in reality, aiming to protect youth who are facing daily racism from peers and educators in other institutions.

Equity (or diversity or inclusion) should not be incidental to structuring education but is integral to ensuring educational success for all youth. Youth and families we work with have taught us to reject one-size-fits-all approaches to education, community-building, and research. We recognize that individual professionals working with youth—educators, youth workers, staff, and counsellors—may acknowledge and respond to youth's unique needs on an individual level (at times), but current educational systems, often, do not account for the labor or space required to understand the needs of individual youth, families, or communities. Educators (or researchers) from communities that are studied often bear the brunt of labor to address injustice in systems of learning, while being under-resourced to do so. As such, the youth we work with are simultaneously navigating a lack of access organized along individual, structural, and systemic lines. In our experience, the institutional work of addressing the roots of everyday harm that youth are navigating is particularly difficult in contexts where systemic discrimination and racism are yet to be acknowledged,[2] let alone addressed. Building strong relationships, including through research, may support the visibility of diverse lived experiences of communities and help illuminate not only if systemic racism and discrimination exist (they do), but how—to foster important changes in school to support the academic achievement and wellbeing of all learners.

Another key consideration across communities we work with is their experiences being treated as if they cannot be trusted to know their own realities, or what they need—a common experience that young people face, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and Latine/x youth who are queer and trans (Cruz, 2014). In Tanya's work, families and youth are being "given" diagnoses in schools that do not correspond to their realities, and which make them feel they are receiving paternalistic advice; regardless of the intentions of educational professionals, this perception by youth and families renders these diagnoses ineffective to support learning. Similarly, the youth that Jayne works with are constantly navigating

pathologizing and paternalistic interventions and are often denied services if they are deemed non-compliant or refuse to participate in the programming or trajectories that adults choose for them (Nichols & Malenfant, 2022). These adults may not have an understanding of the circumstances or everyday experiences of these youth, also rendering these interventions both ineffective and often leading youth to lose trust in educators and other adults around them (Malenfant et al., 2023). We ensure—whenever possible—that we are entering relationships of research honoring youth agency, and offering tangible tools, knowledge, and services to those we work with. We aim to listen to what young people believe educational success means for them. For example, Tanya brings more effective ways of understanding diagnoses that families and youth may be navigating at school. Often, professionals are not communicating about learning differences or diagnoses in a way that is useful for families and students. Regardless of the intentions of these professionals, top-down assessments of learning differences are being interpreted as paternalistic, out of line with educational needs, or limiting, rendering them a largely ineffective tool to foster youth educational success and wellbeing at the moment. Respecting, understanding, and bridging contexts, languages, and needs can be a first step toward effectively supporting Black, low-income families better. We hope, across our research, that we can provide immediately useful information to those we undertake research with, including to support their current work to navigate the very systems we hope to transform.

How can we foster educational success for all youth? Exploring relationships across research and education.

In the current educational landscape in Tio'tia:ke/Montreal, Quebec, and Canada broadly, success for members of these two communities—low-income Black families and gender-diverse youth experiencing precarity—may mean refusing continued engagement in schools or institutions of learning. It certainly must involve strong relationships of trust. Drawing from our own experiences as well as our research, we know that, as youth move into adulthood or enter into post-secondary spaces, educational institutions do not eventually become spaces where racism, transphobia, or classism cease to be experienced. For us, educational success must include structural and systemic transformation—changing the ways that youth in these communities are able to access and thrive in spaces of learning, existing authentically as themselves. While we hope our research will contribute to the transformation of the educational spaces rooted in systems which fail to serve the youth we work with, we also recognize that success for many includes immediate goals within the current school system. The ways that youth experience racism and discrimination in schools can shape what success means, often in ways that are invisibilized in normative understandings of how the school system is structured. In each of our research contexts, significant labor is undertaken by youth to navigate the daily realities of schools. For young people we work with, success may mean that you can finish your high school diploma without experiencing constant racial or transphobic discrimination. We wish to support—through research, collaboration, and relationships of trust—educational spaces where Black students, gender-diverse students, precarious students, and learners who navigate intersections of these identities can feel wanted, safe, accepted, and thrive. We believe that the relationships fostered in community-based research with youth can provide a starting place to model other forms of engagement with learners, across systems, to model new educational pathways to success. This can include youth

being able to stay, safely, in school environments—as "authentically" themselves, feeling that the adults around them have their backs—as well as having access to strong connections to the school and broader community to support their wellbeing as they learn.

Conclusion

In our own educational trajectories and our work as educators and researchers in K–12, post-secondary, and other learning environments, we see an increasing will to support the success and wellbeing of learners who may be labelled "diverse" or who don't fall into normative notions of who students are. However, there is much work to be done. We know how difficult it is to break from intergenerational cycles of educational barriers and a deep mistrust of institutions and access new opportunities for learning. When young learners we work with do access learning spaces, their experiences of discrimination and internalized notions of failure often follow them into adulthood and may shape their relationships with the education of their peers, children, or family members. For many youth, educational spaces communicate on a daily basis that they are not welcome. We see how diplomas and engagement with post-secondary can present the illusion that individual resilience or hard work can negate the structural and systemic barriers that exist in many spaces of learning. We enter our research with a clear aim to make schools better suited for diverse learners and a continuing dedication to working with the community to figure out how to do this. We have seen that the changes we hope to achieve through research and action are changes our community collaborators hope for as well, highlighting the potential that community-led research projects can contribute toward a shared effort for educational justice.

Notes

1. In 2023, the provinces of New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, and Alberta passed policies limiting students' agency and requiring parental consent to use chosen names or pronouns for students in certain age groups.

2. Quebec's Coalition Avenir Québec party (CAQ) maintains that there is no systemic racism in Quebec, despite calls from many communities and advocates to acknowledge and act on this issue (Cabrera, 2022).

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