Evidence Brief

Ten Curriculum-Based Strategies to Engage in Political Consciousness-Raising with Black Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "political consciousness", "critical consciousness", "consciousness-raising", "curriculum", "Black", "racialized", and "youth".

Summary of Evidence: Ten Curriculum-Based Strategies

1. **Connect the personal to the political.**
   Evidence suggests that youth are more likely to become engaged if they perceive issues as directly impacting their lives (Ellis-Williams, 2007). Practitioners may want to focus on supporting youth to **identify the systemic causes of individual hardship** (YouthREX, 2017). By coming to understand their individual adversities as the result of systemic oppression, youth learn not to blame themselves; by taking constructive action to improve their lives and communities, they may gain a sense of possibility and hope (Herr, 2017; Ginwright, 2010).

   Organizations may want to include group discussions and political education in their programming (Ginwright, 2006). Activities that encourage youth to reflect on their common experience can build social capital, and foster an understanding of how personal struggles are shaped by broader political issues (Ginwright, 2007).

2. **Recognize that the issues affecting Black youth are intersectional.**
   In the post-civil rights era, young people's activism and resistance goals are shaped by "a complex social web of inequities" (Ellis-Williams, 2007, p. 109). Practitioners should be mindful of how the **intersections of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion shape the unique experiences of Black youth** (Anucha et al., 2017). For example, consider that the lives of young Black women are impacted by over-sexualization, while Black boys who identify as Muslim experience increased criminalization and surveillance (Anucha et al., 2017).

3. **Make space to discuss current issues.**
   Educators can foster critical consciousness by making time to **discuss racial inequity that youth see on the news, on social media, and in their communities** (El-Amin et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that politically-charged moments, such as the election of U.S. President

Donald Trump, can shape critical consciousness development among early adolescents of colour (Kennedy et al., 2020). Effective educators are able to recognize the impact of current events on students' lives, and "fold in these conversations spontaneously when the need arises" (El-Amin et al., 2017, p. 22).

Research shows that an ***open classroom climate*** – one that promotes "the discussion of controversial issues and respect for diverse opinions" – can foster sociopolitical efficacy and critical action (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014, p. 1811). Regular, sustained dialogue between youth and adults can facilitate opportunities for critical reflection, and provide space for youth to demonstrate political efficacy (Kennedy et al., 2020). Current issues also present an opportunity to connect the personal to the political (see #1, above) by making associations between policies/political actions and young people's identities (Kennedy et al., 2020).

Educators should ask questions that encourage thoughtful discussion and reflection. Instead of shutting down political humour, such as jokes and off-hand comments, facilitate further conversation by inviting young people to share their perspectives.

4. **Emphasize and celebrate Black excellence.**
   Alternative approaches to political consciousness-raising for Black youth acknowledge that, in general, "the Black child sees a curriculum that does not mirror the positive attributes of his race and culture" (Harper, 1977, p. 134). Black youth and families in Ontario have publicly shared how the achievements, successes, contributions, hopes, and dreams of Black communities continue to go unrecognized (Anucha et al., 2017). Highlighting this erasure and emphasizing Black excellence can rewrite deficits-based narratives that undervalue assets and magnify perceived shortcomings (Anucha et al., 2017).

   In order to foster confidence and learning among Black youth, educators should strive to create "a curricular atmosphere of positivism as opposed to an atmosphere of negativism" (Harper, 1977, p. 135). On the first day of class at Toronto's FreedomSchool, a youth and parent-driven initiative "created to respond to a lack of humanizing, self-affirming, queer-positive educational opportunities for Black children" (FreedomSchool Toronto, n.d.), Black youth are encouraged to write personal affirmations (Newbold, 2017). FreedomSchool recognizes that "the social and family background of Black children ... are a strength that children can bring into their learning environment. ...teachings begin with self-love, pride in self and community" (FreedomSchool Toronto, n.d.).

5. **Engage youth in critical media literacy.**
   Critical media literacy "works toward healing the wounds of youth who are affected by racial

violence and … provides youth with opportunities to **investigate, dismantle, and rewrite the damaging narratives** that mainstream media … use to construct and oppress Black youth" (Baker-Bell et al., 2017, p. 138). Critical media literacy can be an effective tool for raising political consciousness in discussions of electoral campaigns/political discourse (Busey, 2016). Educators should ask questions that encourage youth to critically examine the way that racialized communities and their interests are framed in political discourse (e.g., in debates, town halls, conventions, and speeches) (Busey, 2016). Teaching Black youth to recognize how the media and other institutions represent them in inaccurate and hurtful ways, as well as how they can respond to these representations, can be healing (Baker-Bell et al., 2017).

6. **Teach the language of inequality.**
   Educators can foster critical consciousness in youth by introducing a framework for analyzing inequality (El-Amin et al., 2017). In particular, teaching the language of inequality can help students "read the world" and "make racial injustice visible" (El-Amin et al., 2017, p. 21). For example, one urban American school that serves predominantly Black students teaches ***The Three I's***, a framework for recognizing different forms of racism in society (i.e., interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and internalized racism) (El-Amin et al., 2017). Students used these concepts to identify examples of racism in their community and a fictional urban neighbourhood. Keeping It Real, a curriculum for therapeutically engaging Black youth, introduces relevant terminology (e.g., racism, stereotypes, discrimination, shadeism) before asking youth to reflect on their own experiences (Williams, 2020).

7. **Connect youth to Black mentors/role models.**
   Early engagement on issues of social justice, equality, and freedom by family, teachers, and community members can contribute to young people's civic engagement (Ellis-Williams, 2007). Fostering "a sense of common struggle" (Ginwright, 2007, p. 412) among youth and adults can facilitate a collective racial and cultural identity. Organizations should keep in mind that care within Black communities is more than interpersonal relationships; rather, it is seen as a collective and individual responsibility, with an emphasis on "cultural, communal, and political solidarity" (Ginwright, 2010, p. 83).

8. **Provide non-traditional pathways to civic engagement.**
   Young people who are excluded from mainstream civic activities, such as student government or citywide youth councils, may draw on **alternative strategies for civic engagement** (Ginwright, 2006). For instance, evidence suggests that Black youth use hip-hop culture as a political organizing and consciousness-raising tool (Clay, 2006; Ginwright, 2006). Hip-hop provides a platform for "expressing pain, anger, and the frustration of oppression", as well as politicizing peers on local and national issues (Ginwright, 2006, para.

21). In the absence of traditional participatory opportunities, some youth gain organizing skills by participating in networks of hip-hop artists, party promoters, filmmakers, and hip-hop clubs (Ginwright, 2007).

Facilitated, strengths-based songwriting programs may allow youth to recognize and address systemic and structural forces that affect them, and assert their presence in their communities (Hess, 2018). These programs are most effective when they use culturally-relevant pedagogy and centre young people's musical interests (Hess, 2018).

9. **Promote political/civic engagement through healing-centred organizing.**
   Healing-centred organizing places ***healing*** – defined as a "process that is inclusive of the mind, body, and spirit and that aims to restore and renew the individual and collective emotional and spiritual wellbeing" – at the centre of activities to promote social justice (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015, p. 3). There are four principles that facilitators can use to guide their own healing-centred organizing (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015, p. 5):
   i) Healing is in response to the needs of the community.
   ii) Healing is political.
   iii) Healing and organizing intersect.
   iv) Healing is found in culture and spirituality.

   Organizations can support healing by creating spaces to address the collective and generational trauma that exists within Black communities. Rather than measuring and defining change in terms of political or material gain, recognize that "helping communities heal from the trauma of systemic oppression and inequality is a political act" (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015, p. 7).

10. **Cultivate hope.**
   Hope and radical imagination are essential for activism and social change, as they "inspire youth to understand that community conditions are not permanent, and that the first step to change is by imagining new possibilities" (Ginwright, 2010, p. 86). Practitioners should strive to **offer a strong, unwavering message of hope and resilience** (Watson, 2015). Foster **critical hope** by recognizing the forces that impact young people's lives, and working alongside youth to examine possible paths toward a more just society (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

References

Anucha, U., Srikanthan, S., Siad-Togane, R., & Galabuzi, G. E. (2017). ***Doing right together for Black youth: What we learned from the community engagement sessions for the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan.*** Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX). https://youthrex.com/report/doing-right-together-for-black-youth-what-we-learned-from-the-community-engagement-sessions-for-the-ontario-black-youth-action-plan/

Baker-Bell, A., Stanbrough, R. J., & Everett, S. (2017). The stories they tell: Mainstream media, pedagogies of healing, and critical media literacy. ***English Education, 49***(2), 130-152. https://youthrex.com/academic-literature/the-stories-they-tell-mainstream-media-pedagogies-of-healing-and-critical-media-literacy/

Busey, C. L. (2016). Teaching the election with purpose: Toward a framework of racial media literacy and [socio] political consciousness when discussing elections in the social studies classroom. ***The Clearing House: A Journal of Education Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 89***(6), 228-234.

Chavez-Diaz, M., & Lee, N. (2015). ***A conceptual mapping of healing centered youth organizing: Building a case for healing justice.*** Working paper. Oakland, CA: Urban Peace Movement. http://urbanpeacemovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/HealingMapping_FINALVERSION.pdf

Clay, A. (2006). “All I need is one mic”: Mobilizing youth for social change in the post-civil rights era. ***Social Justice, 33***(2), 105-121.

Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. ***Harvard Educational Review, 79***(2), 181-194.

Ellis-Williams, A. (2007). Discovering the possibilities: A study of African American youth resistance and activism. ***Educational Foundations, 21***(1-2), 107–124.

El-Amin, A., Seider, S., Graves, D., Tamerat, J., Clark, S., Soutter, M., Johannsen, J., & Malhotra, S. (2017). Critical consciousness: A key to student achievement. ***Kappan, 98***(5), 18-23.

FreedomSchool Toronto. (n.d.). ***FreedomSchool Toronto***. https://freedomschooltoronto.ca/

Ginwright, S. (2006). Toward a politics of relevance: Race, resistance and African American youth activism. ***Youth Activism***. http://ya.ssrc.org/african/Ginwright/

Ginwright, S. (2007). Black youth activism and the role of critical social capital in Black community organizations. ***American Behavioral Scientist*, *51***(3), 403–418.

Ginwright, S. A. (2010). Peace out to revolution! Activism among African American youth: An argument for radical healing. ***Young*, *18***(1), 77-96.

Godfrey, E. B., & Grayman, J. K. (2014). Teaching citizens: The role of open classroom climate in fostering critical consciousness among youth. ***Journal of Youth Adolescence*, *43***, 1801-817.

Harper, F. (1977). Developing a curriculum of self-esteem for Black youth. ***The Journal of Negro Education*, *46***(2), 133–140.

Herr, K. (2017). Insiders doing PAR with youth in their schools: Negotiating professional boundaries and healing justice. ***International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *30***(5), 450-463.

Hess, J. (2018). Detroit youth speak back: Rewriting deficit perspectives through songwriting. ***Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, *216*,** 7-30.
Research Summary available at https://youthrex.com/research-summary/detroit-youth-speak-back-rewriting-deficit-perspectives-through-songwriting/

Kennedy, H., Matyasic, S., Clark, L. S., Engle, C., Anyon, Y., Weber, M., Jimenez, C., Mwirigi, M. O., & Nisle, S. (2020). Early adolescent critical consciousness development in the age of Trump. ***Journal of Adolescent Research*, *35***(3), 279-308.

Newbold, L. (2017, Sept 29). ***Black liberation is the most important subject.*** Inspirit Foundation. https://inspiritfoundation.org/black-lives-matter-freedom-school/

Watson, A. (2015). ***Wounds of an invisible war: Distress and healing in youth exposed to multiple forms of violence*** (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Alliant International University, San Francisco, CA.

Williams, K. (2020). ***Keeping it real: Engaging therapeutically with Black youth. Culturally informed curriculum and toolkit***. Delta Family Resource Centre.

YouthREX. (2017, Sept 27). ***Understanding intergenerational trauma and intergenerational healing: Recovery, resilience & wellness*** (Webinar recording) on Vimeo [Video file]. https://youthrex.com/webinar/webinar-understanding-intergenerational-trauma-and-intergenerational-healing-recovery-resilience-wellness