



EVIDENCE BRIEF

Promising Practices for the Economic Empowerment of Black Youth: Supporting Black Youth in Education, Employment, and Entrepreneurship

This Evidence Brief summarizes seven evidence-based practices to support Black youth in education, employment, and entrepreneurship. These efforts can shift critical consciousness of Black youth and increase their equitable access to resources and opportunities that facilitate economic empowerment.

The content for this Evidence Brief is informed by the report *Outcomes Framework: Economic Empowerment of Black Youth in Ontario*¹ developed by YouthREX to support community stakeholders as well as relevant government institutions to build a shared understanding of possible interventions and outcomes under the Economic Empowerment Stream of the Black Youth Action Plan.

The Outcomes Framework is informed by the *SIDE Theory of Change for the Economic Empowerment of Black Youth* that includes four quadrants of change grounded in an understanding that an economic empowerment stream for Black youth must provide opportunities for them to develop skills and capacities but must also include institutional change strategies that address systemic barriers that they face.

01. RAISE CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF BLACK YOUTH.

Quadrant #1 of the *SIDE Theory of Change* highlights the need to *Shift Critical Consciousness* as part of the economic empowerment of Black youth through processes that overturn beliefs and expectations that limit the capabilities of Black people. Advancing equitable empowerment must include a shift in critical consciousness among both youth and adults, members of Black and non-Black communities, and citizens from various socio-economic backgrounds. The consequences of anti-Black ideologies are not only enacted externally but internally as well. The internalization of stereotypical behaviour may impact

Black youth as these racial beliefs and understandings are deeply embedded in the social fabric of Canada. Consciousness-raising among Black youth is therefore important as it can “empower youth to understand their personal experiences within an unequal social system that grants systemic privileges or disadvantages to individuals based on social group memberships”.² Consciousness-raising can **empower youth to become agents of change**³ and can help **build collective power** among Black youth.³ Activities that encourage youth to reflect on their common experience can therefore **build critical social capital** and foster an understanding of how personal struggles are shaped by broader political issues.⁴

02. RECOGNIZE THAT THE ISSUES AFFECTING BLACK YOUTH ARE INTERSECTIONAL.

Practitioners should be mindful of how the **intersections of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion shape the unique experiences of Black youth** in education and employment.⁵ Keep in mind that the many barriers Black youth encounter may be compounded by other experiences of marginalization. For example, a lack of representation and lack of support may be particularly challenging for young Black women who enter post-secondary Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs.⁶ In entrepreneurship, Black women also face an “uphill climb”⁷; they are underrepresented in high-earning industries, and secure disproportionately low rates of venture-capital funding.⁷

03. FACILITATE ACCESS TO CRITICAL SOCIAL CAPITAL.

Mentorship programs can **expand young people’s social**

networks and build critical social capital. Black youth describe a lack of visible role models as an impediment to their development; having an **improved awareness of Black success stories** can contribute to Black youth's increased aspirations and a belief that they, too, can achieve success. Mentorship programs that **adopt a strength-based approach** and acknowledge Black youth's assets, agency, resilience, and potential can improve confidence and self-image, and support a young person's sense of possibility.^{8,9}

Keep in mind that **group mentoring** may be more beneficial for Black youth than one-to-one programs,⁹ and that **same-race matches** may be especially supportive.⁹ Given that Black youth often lack access to Black role models at school, mentorship programs that rely on same-race matching may help mitigate the negative impacts of a non-inclusive education workforce. Black role models and mentors can also support consciousness-raising for Black youth and build a sense of collective power.³

Organizations can support Black youth by developing mentoring programs that are **oriented toward post-secondary education pathways or training and career opportunities.** For example, mentors can support youth who face barriers to employment navigate the labour market by showing them what kinds of opportunities exist and helping them develop effective career search skills.¹⁰ Targeted mentorship programming can also facilitate increased participation among Black youth in the two fields:

a) In entrepreneurship

One impact of economic marginalization is a lack of available resources and mentors for those who are interested in pursuing this path.^{7,11} Mentors can help young Black entrepreneurs navigate the process of applying for loans and grants, provide practical advice, support making connections, and navigate challenges.

In addition to facilitating mentorship opportunities, organizations can support Black youth navigate entrepreneurship by **making business networks visible and easily accessible.**⁷ Networks can offer advice on various aspects of business ownership, and connect

prospective or new entrepreneurs with experienced business owners, who may become role models.

b) In STEM

Mentorship and role models are vital to improve the odds of success for young Black students in STEM programs. One study¹² found that older students can provide younger Black students in STEM fields the support they need to continue their studies. As more Black students enter STEM programs, a greater number of role models and mentors will be available.

Black youth benefit from mentors and role models at *all* stages of their journey to meaningful employment. Although youth-serving organizations can facilitate mentorship opportunities, lack of representation is a *systemic* issue that can only be addressed with broad, system-wide change, and a shift towards embracing the multitude of examples of Black excellence.

04. ENGAGE PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS.

Evidence points to the importance of parental and caregiver involvement in academic achievement for youth.¹³ However, Black youth often feel isolated in their educational challenges, as their parents and caregivers do not always have the understanding or the capacity to advocate for their children's education.¹⁴ Given disproportionate outcomes in education and the discrimination experienced by Black students, the importance of parental and caregiver advocacy is heightened. Engaging parents and caregivers through **trainings, resources, and networks** can support and empower through **improved advocacy knowledge and skills.** As these familial and community networks become stronger, more resilient, and more capable of responding to issues and crises, Black youth and their parents or caregivers can experience **raised critical consciousness** and **increased self-esteem.**

05. FOCUS ON BUILDING SKILLS.

Targeted academic supports and career preparation programming, both within and outside of the formal education system, can advance equitable access to

capacity building and training, and improve knowledge and skills that align with the educational and career interests of Black youth. These supports could include:¹⁵

- **tutoring programs** (individualized academic supports that can also develop soft skills, like communication, teamwork, and problem solving);
- **bridging programs** (wraparound supports for the transition to post-secondary education);
- **networking opportunities** (which could be integrated in mentorship programs); and
- **career guidance programs** (which could be integrated in mentorship programs).

Shifts in the labour market – such as a decline in manufacturing jobs, developments in technology, and the rise of precarious work¹⁶ – have created a skills mismatch between post-secondary education and training credentials and employment opportunities.¹⁷ In order to better prepare youth to enter the workforce, **employment and training programs should be designed in collaboration with sector stakeholders.**¹⁷ Skill development programs are more effective when they align curricula and credentialing with industry standards, provide industry exposure to future employees, and connect jobseekers with employers.¹⁷

Young Black entrepreneurs can benefit from **opportunities to improve their knowledge, skills, and capacity for business ownership.**⁷ Organizations can support youth by providing free programs online or in workshops to upskill or reskill, as well as access to free technological services and resource inventories with industry-specific information, such as grant programs and trainings.⁷ In addition to courses related to business ownership, **financial capability trainings or workshops** could provide concrete and practical strategies or access to supports.

06. PROVIDE NON-TRADITIONAL PATHWAYS TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

Civic engagement can support youth to build social capital, acquire and develop skills, and better prepare for employment.¹⁸ Young people who are excluded

from mainstream civic engagement activities, such as student government or citywide youth councils, may draw on **alternative strategies for civic engagement.**¹⁹ For example, evidence suggests that, in the absence of traditional participatory opportunities, Black youth may use hip-hop culture as a political organizing and consciousness-raising tool.^{4,19,20} Programs can support Black youth by thinking ‘outside the box’ and offering creative avenues for civic engagement.

07. CULTIVATE HOPE.

Increasing aspirations and a sense of possibility is critical to Black youth economic empowerment. 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”.²¹ Practitioners should strive to **offer a strong, unwavering message of hope and resilience.**²² 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.²³

ENDNOTES

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