



“It is a widely held misconception that low-income parents have little value for education, but this study’s findings support others by showing that Black parents are very encouraging and support the academic success of their children” (p. 109).

Low-Income Black Parents Supporting Their Children’s Success Through Mentoring Circles

1. What is the research about?

This research explores the ways that low-income Black parents are able to support their children in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in the face of institutional and pervasive anti-Black racism. Black Canadians experience poverty, unemployment, and income gaps at a disproportionate rate compared to their white counterparts, and these are just a few examples of deeply-rooted socioeconomic injustices cited by the author. Black parents are often stigmatized by educational institutions as being ‘unconcerned’ about their children’s education, which reinforces stereotypes among Black students as well. However, low-income Black parents who are working may not be able to commit time to engage in school communities in expected ways, such as through parent councils, extracurricular activities, or even parent-teacher interviews.

This study looks at the ways in which **mentoring circles** can help Black parents navigate Eurocentric and exclusionary school systems and support their children’s academic success, despite potentially hostile relationships with their children’s schools.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in the Greater Toronto Area, specifically in underserved communities.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about low-income Black parents, their children, and their relationships with their children’s schools in the TDSB.

4. How was the research done?

The researcher used **an intersectional lens**, specifically with respect to race, class, and gender (understanding how these identities and experiences *intersect* for Black parents and children).

This research involved two 2-hour **focus groups**, with 7-8 Black parents in each group (ages 28-42); all but one participant identified as female and most identified as single parents. **Demographic questionnaires** were distributed to parents, and the focus groups enabled parents to openly share their experiences with the educational system, guided by two research questions:

- What challenges have you or your children encountered in the school system?
- What strategies have you used to overcome those challenges?

The focus groups were **recorded and transcribed** (written out word for word); the transcripts were then **coded**, both using a software program and manually, to analyze for common themes and narratives in order to surface strategies used by parents.

5. What are the key findings?

This research uncovered **two main strategies** that low-income Black parents, particularly Black single mothers, use to support their children in schools:

a) **“Sistah Mentorship”**: informal mentoring networks in which Black women rely on their friends, who are fellow mothers, to overcome challenges of oppression, including issues with their children’s schools.

This can be known as **“othermothering”** (p. 102), which is based in African culture and “values both self and community care” (p. 102) through kinships between Black women that include looking out for one another’s children.

Through these networks, Black mothers are able to **circulate information**, including concerns about school discipline practices. However, this can also lead to misinformation and misunderstandings. Black mothers also depend on each other when it comes to **experiences of systemic racism** within schools, such as microaggressions.

b) **Black Parents as Power Brokers**: maintaining communication with teachers and schools as a means of advocating for their children.

Black women in society tend to be stereotyped through a racist and sexist lens that allows them to be degraded by institutions; increasing their involvement in schools, therefore, becomes **a form of resistance**. Black women inform themselves about school practices and policies and try to foster a positive relationship with their children’s schools so they can better advocate for their children.

Overall, these findings suggest that the **mentoring circles of Black mothers** are affirming spaces that are beneficial to Black parents and their children, in contrast to school systems that reinforce Eurocentric ideas and practices. These results also challenge harmful stereotypes about low-income Black parents and their presumed ‘lack of investment’ in their children’s education. For these parents, “community cultural wealth” (p. 109) is an essential framework, and Black mothers require structural supports to bear with these race, class, and gender-based burdens.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Schools, as well as youth programs, should extend their efforts to Black parents to address equity gaps. The study offered the following recommendations that could be considered by youth programs and youth-serving agencies:

- i) Provide information about policies and practices to Black parents.
- ii) Elaborate on the Individualized Education Program and share information through “newsletters, parent information sessions, and social media” (p. 111).
- iii) Engage in anti-Black racism training to prevent stereotyping Black parents’ involvement in their children’s education.
- iv) Work on “effective outreach and communication strategies” (p. 111) to be more inclusive of Black parents in the community.

The results from this research shed light on the experiences of low-income Black parents facing anti-Black racism in the education system and the ways they respond to this racism in order to effectively advocate for their children. Youth workers can use this information to **be critical of oppressive institutions** and support Black students and their parents through **a framework of equity and inclusion**. They can help to cultivate the success of Black students and advocate for them with, or on behalf of, their parents, including by working with educators. Youth workers can also assist in filling the knowledge gap where there are misunderstandings/misinformation between Black parents and schools.



Butler, A. (2021). Low-income Black parents supporting their children’s success through mentoring circles. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 44(1), 93-117.

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