

# Negotiating Anti-Black Racism in ‘Liberal’ Contexts: The Experiences of Black Youth Workers in Community-Based Educational Spaces



JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS  
RESEARCH  
SUMMARY

*“In particular, predominantly white spaces that seek to ‘help’ and that express an ethos of ‘niceness,’ ...further perpetuate racism ... As such, congratulatory liberal narratives abound even in the midst of Black suffering. The counternarratives from Black communities point to their suffering, yet the demands for reprieve are met with deflection, denial, or discourses of ‘helping’ rooted in paternalism” (p. 751).*

## 1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This study examines **how anti-Black racism operates in community-based educational spaces** (i.e. after-school programs) in cities that are often described as ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive.’ While these environments are typically seen as inclusive and equitable, the research highlights how deeper forms of racism continue to shape the experiences of Black youth and youth workers. The study explores how Black youth workers understand and respond to racism in their work, and how broader social and political contexts influence the programming available to Black youth.

## 2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The study took place in an unnamed, mid-sized, predominantly white U.S. city with a population of approximately 250,000 people (referred to by a fictional name, ‘Pleasant Ridge,’ devised by the author). About 75% of residents are white, while only 6.4% are Black. Despite its reputation as a ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ city with a high quality of life, ‘Pleasant Ridge’ has significant racial disparities affecting Black residents, particularly Black youth.

## 3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research focuses on Black youth workers, adults who work closely with Black youth in community-based educational programs. These youth workers play an important role in supporting young people’s learning, identity development, and wellbeing. Their perspectives provide insight into both the experiences of Black youth and the challenges of delivering programming in racialized contexts.

## 4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

This research is guided by **Black Critical Theory**, which focuses on how anti-Black racism is deeply embedded in social systems and everyday experiences, and uses **qualitative** methods (focused on describing qualities, characteristics, processes, or experiences), including:

- **In-depth interviews** with 15 Black youth workers.
- **Observations** of community events focused on racism.
- **Analysis** of local media and public discussions about racial disparities.

The researcher used a **bifocal approach** (focusing on two distinct areas) to **surface findings from the data** that examined both:

- **Macro-level factors** (e.g., city politics, funding structures, public discourse).
- **Micro-level experiences** (e.g., day-to-day work with youth).

This approach helped show how larger systems of power shape what happens within youth programs.

## 5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The study identified **three ways** anti-Black racism shows up in community-based educational spaces:

- i. **Black experiences of suffering are often dismissed.**  
Black youth workers reported that the experiences of Black youth were often ignored or only taken seriously when there was formal data to back them up, rather than being accepted as valid lived experience.
- ii. **Conversations about racism are shut down.**  
Discussions about racism were often limited or discouraged, particularly in organizations with white leadership. This often happened because of discomfort, concerns about funding, or a desire to maintain a 'positive' image.
- iii. **Black youth workers are relied on but undervalued.**  
Black youth workers' knowledge and labour were frequently undervalued. Many faced barriers to leadership roles, while still being relied on for their expertise in working with Black youth.

## 6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research matters because community-based programs are often viewed as safe and supportive spaces for youth. However, if these spaces reproduce the same inequities found in schools and society, they may **limit opportunities for meaningful support, identity development, and social change**. This research highlights that **good intentions and inclusive language are not enough** to create equitable youth programs, and that even youth-serving spaces that see themselves as 'progressive' can still harm Black youth and Black staff.

For youth workers and organizations, this research suggests the need to:

- Create space for **honest conversations about racism** with youth.
- Recognize and address **power dynamics within organizations**, especially in leadership representation.
- Value and support the expertise of **Black youth workers**.
- Move beyond surface-level diversity efforts toward **structural change**.

Community-based programs have the potential to be powerful spaces for learning, identity development, and social change. However, this requires actively addressing anti-Black racism, rather than avoiding or minimizing its existence.

- 🔍 Baldrige, B. J. (2020). Negotiating anti-Black racism in 'liberal' contexts: The experiences of Black youth workers in community-based educational spaces. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(6), 747–766.