

Beyond Tokenisms: The Role of Non-Profit Leaders, Social Work Educators and Frontline Youth Workers in Combating Anti-Black Racism in Policies and Praxis

Kuir ë Garang

kuirthiy@yahoo.com

Toronto Metropolitan University

Adrienne Young

York University

Rahma Togane

York University

Sinthu Srithankan

University of Toronto

Cyril Cromwell Simmonds

Toronto Metropolitan University

Uzo Anucha

York University

Carol Wade

University of Windsor

Research Article

Keywords: Afrocentricity, Black Youth, Anti-Black Racism, Education, Leadership

Posted Date: October 30th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11396034/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Educational institutions and social service organizations that work with Black Canadian¹ youth and their families struggle to combat challenges posed by anti-Black racism (ABR). These challenges stem from lack of knowledge about ABR and the refusal or reluctance by leaders and educators to accept that ABR exists at work and in the community. Workplaces that accept that ABR exists may still struggle accepting that it has harmful effects on Black youth. Scholars have shown, and our qualitative results in this paper also support this, that rationalizing youth experiences, histories and voices from a monocultural, Eurocentric perspective, has a lot to do with this denial. In this qualitative paper, we present, according to the participants, some of the ways agency leaders may ensure that anti-Black racism (ABR) mitigation policies lead to long-term transformative change in the Ontario youth sector and in the community. Through an Afrocentric framework and data obtained from Y-X's² *Project*, we highlight educational, leadership and administrative impediments to ABR mitigation as raised by the participants, culturally relevant best practices and supportive policies being used by frontline workers and agency leaders, and how these results may help leaders support ABR mitigating initiatives that operationalize policies and practices beyond administrative and educational tokenisms.

Introduction and Social Context

Canadian institutions (such as schools, colleges and universities) and organizations that work with African-Canadian¹ youth and their families in Ontario struggle to end social and economic challenges posed by anti-Black racism (ABR). These challenges stem from lack of knowledge about ABR and the refusal or reluctance by leaders and educators to accept that ABR exists. When professionals accept that ABR exists, they still doubt its material effects on Black families and communities. Scholars have shown that rationalizing Black youth experiences from a monocultural (Asante, 1991) perspective undergirds this denial (Bernard & Smith, 2018; Schiele, 2017; Asante, 2020). In addition, Canadian multicultural silos impede vital intercultural contacts and relations (Berry & Grigoryev, 2022) necessary in combatting ABR.

This affects youth and professionals working with them. Some of these challenges include feeling ignored when reporting ABR incidents to organizational leaders, having racist experiences trivialized, or being challenged as overly sensitive (Mullings et al., 2021). African-Canadian youth and African-Canadian youth workers, for instance, may be regarded as having insensitivity to “adversity”, assuming they are used to “toughness of Black individuals” (Kunstman et al., 2023, p. 2). This ascription exposes them to “race-based traumatic stress” (Carter et al., 2020, p. 11). This trauma stems from constant exposure to racist incidents or ecologies (Loo et al. 2001, p. 504) without immediate recourse to supportive services. That Africans do not feel pain was used by slave-masters on plantation to work slaves to death. Nietzsche (2003), for instance, argued that Africans do not feel pain to the same degree as Europeans. Thomas Jefferson (1918) believed Africans slaves “seem to require less sleep” (p. 65). These harmful assumptions, and others like them, have sedimented into the modern western epistemes,

Canada not excepted, due to legacies of slavery and colonialism that have not been subjected to serious, corrective redress.

In this paper, we present possible ways agency and institutional leaders and educators may combat ABR through policies for long-term transformative change in youth-serving institution and organizations. We aim to address the following research question: What are some of the transformative ABR policies institutional leaders and educators can implement to make the youth sector, and other institutions working with the youth in Ontario, welcoming and supportive of African-Canadian youth? We will also emphasize how our results may help agency leaders generate and support ABR mitigating initiatives that move their agency policies and practices beyond public relation tokenisms wearing the masks of anti-ABR policies (Mugo & Puplampu, 2022).

Here is how we have structured the paper. We continue below with Afrocentrism as the theoretical framework through which we answer the research question and interpret the data. This is followed by how ABR is manifested in Canadian institutions historically and in the present. This section is then followed by the data we use, its source, and how we analysed it. The last three sections are the research results, a critical analysis of the result to locate our findings within the body of literature, policy recommendations and the conclusion.

The Afrocentric Framework

In this paper, we use *Afrocentricity* and *Afrocentrism* interchangeably. To some scholars, however, they are not the same (Asante, 2020). We owe an explanation to our readers and Afrocentric scholars. *Afrocentricity* is much a *theory* as it is a *worldview*. Because an Afrocentric method may involve methodological and philosophical assumptions, it is important to stress that they may be utilized differently.

According to Asante (2020), “Afrocentricity is a philosophical paradigm used to generate theories and methods of analysis and correctives to the social, economic, and cultural conditions of African people” (p. 147). He cautions that *Afrocentricity* should not be confused with *Afrocentrism* because “Afrocentrism is a term frequently employed by those who see Afrocentricity in religious terms, that is, a belief system, rather than an analytical paradigm” (Asante, 2020, p. 148). While Asante makes this important distinction, which we want to acknowledge for scholarly and conceptual clarity, we will not differentiate between the two because we will not be using Afrocentrism in any religious context unless as part of a cluster of Afrocentric epistemes.

Before we discuss the usefulness of Afrocentrism, we must note another cautious memo about our use of Afrocentrism. This is about misunderstandings and caricaturing of Afrocentrism either as a self-comforting myth (see Palermo, 1997) or as an incoherent, problem-laden framework (see Schiele, 2017). While this is important to note here for scholarly prudence, it is a charge that is misguided. Here is why. Because militant African-American, Afro-Caribbean and continental African writers, scholars and

activists used an Afrocentric framework to argue that ancient Egypt was a “Black African” civilization (Diop 2012 [1974]) or that ancient Greeks were taught by Egyptians the tenets of civilization that would later inform western civilization (Bernal, 2003), some European and European-American researchers have reduced Afrocentrism to debates about the African-vs-European origin of the ancient Egyptian civilization (Palermo, 1997). This is a disservice to the richness and complexity of Afrocentricity in making sense of our social environments and social problems such as ABR.

Afrocentrism is neither a dogma nor is it a closed system of thought that refuses to learn or borrows from other world views. Mazama (2000) has noted that the Afrocentric paradigm borrows from other epistemic and theoretical traditions including “European ones” (p. 287). It emphasizes scholarly and epistemic humility (Asante, 1991). Asante (2002) has also noted that the Afrocentric framework “is open ended; it is not a closed system” (p. 98). Like any theory, its philosophical assumptions and principles are therefore subject to contradictions and controversies. We may therefore not agree with some renderings of Afrocentrism or some of its scholarly applications such as the Diopian dualism of Southern versus Northern cultural Cradles or the two cradle theory (Schiele, 2017; Diop, 1989). Having provided definitions, it is now important to show how useful the theory is in this paper.

The main theoretical assumption is the centring of the experiences and worldview of African peoples. It is neither the centring of Africa as a place nor is it the assumption that only the worldview of the people of African descent is truthful. Because of colonialism and slavery, Africans on the continent and in the diaspora see the world through European lenses. This cultural dislocation, disorientation, according to Mazama (2000), makes it “increasingly difficult for us to orient our lives in a positive and constructive manner” (p. 388). What the theory recommends is that “Africans must be the center of their own narratives” (Asante, 2020, p. 148). The argument is that there is no one cardinal cultural and epistemic tradition from which the rest of the world must play allegiance. Afrocentrists argue that the world has different cultural centers that must communicate mutually to avoid hegemonies.

The argument is that we must acknowledge that different people have different worldviews, experiences, and cultural centers. That some registers of worldviews may be wrong is something that must be subject to critical analysis, not dismiss *a priori*. As Asante (1991) has noted, “Centricity is a concept that can be applied to any culture” (p. 171). What Afrocentrists suggest is an agential requirement for African people to rationalize the world through their own cultural center and experiences without condoning “ethnocentric valorization at the expense of degrading other groups’ perspective” (Asante, 1991, p. 172). What the theory encourages is an enabling cultural condition where, for instance, African-American or African-Canadian “children learn to interpret and center phenomena in the context of African heritage, while White students are taught to see that their own centers are not threatened by the presence or contributions of African Americans and others” (Asante 1991, p. 174).

The Afrocentric framework can therefore allow youth workers and organizational leaders to appreciate their own worldviews and cultures without dismissing the place culture and worldview plays in the lives of the youth with whom they work (Bernard & Smith, 2018). As Asante (1991) has argued in the African-

American context, “Certainly, if African American children were taught to be fully aware of the struggles of our African forebears they would find a renewed sense of purpose and vision in their own lives. They would cease acting as if they have no past and no future” (p. 177). This is equally important to African-Canadian youth as it is to youth workers working with them (Bernard & Smith (2018).

Anti-Black Racism (ABR)

ABR, which is racism directed at people of African descent, has a long history in Canada. This history, from slavery and racist state policies, for instance, has created social situations in which stereotypes, prejudgements and societal marginalization become normative in policies, laws and institutional protocols. In this section, we present sample historical and contemporary manifestations of ABR in Canadian educational institutions, social service organizations and the Canadian society at large. Our aim here is to show historical *continuities* of ABR and, we hope, encourage cultural humility among Canadians (Bernard & Smith, 2018).

Historical Context of ABR

Until the late 1960s, racism and Eurocentrism were institutionalized in Canadian provincial and federal laws. Walker (1985) has noted that between 1783 and the founding of Canadian federation in 1867, ABR was informed by stereotypes from slavery and racialization of economic status. He observed that by 1867, the racial color line had already been established (Walker, 1985, p. 8). Drew (1856) has argued that “prejudice against the African race is here very strongly marked” (p. 29). In 1850s in southern Ontario, European-Canadian parents removed their children from school because they did not want to sit next to African-Canadian students. This affected how European-Canadian children perceived and related to African-Canadians. As Bernard and Smith (2018) have noted, “Socialization of children is an integral part of the educational system in Canada” (p. 151).

By the turn of the century, the Canadian state formalized these informal attitudes. Schwinghamer (2021) has argued that there was a lot of pressure from civic organizations such as The Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) to ban people of African descent from migrating to Canada. For instance, IODE wrote on March 31, 1911, that “We view with alarm the continuous and rapid influx of Negro settlers.” IODE in Alberta worried that European-Canadian farmers would leave if African-Canadians settled next to them. Canadian officials also bribed immigration officials. The state also hired African-American doctors to question African-Americans why they wanted to move to “a country that is frigid, unsettled, unknown to which they are climatically unfamiliar and financially unfit” (Miller, 1911). This was to disguise Canadian state racism (Schwinghamer, 2021). Canada has historically compared its racist past favorably with the United States (Bernard & Smith, 2018). While racism was legalized and politically overt in Canada, the color line in the tradition of the American Jim Crow was not (Walker, 1985).

Despite the absence of legal color line, Canadian institutions, businesses, schools and universities still discriminated against African-Canadians (Biggs, 1954). The Canadian army, for instance, rejected African-Canadian volunteers during the First World War (Walker, 1985; National Apology Advisory Committee, 2022). State officials at the time claimed the war “is a white man’s war” and that “many White men would simply not wish to serve alongside Black men in battle” (National Apology Advisory Committee, 2022). It took two years (1914–1916) for the Canadian state to allow them into the army as a segregated lumbering unit: No. 2 Construction Battalion.

Businesses, for instance, disguised racism as decisions by private companies. The town of Dresden, Ontario, became infamous for this as it made national news for its informal color line in business (Biggs, 1954). Excluded from mainstream schools, African-Canadians preferred their own educational spaces (McLaren, 2004). Without paths to professional jobs, African-Canadian men mostly worked as potters (“George”) and women worked as house servants (McTair, 2000). Universities refused them admission and barred them from admissions to professional schools such as medicine and law (Henry-Dixon, 2021).

Theatres either refused them tickets, or they restricted them to the gallery seats even when they could afford premium seats. For instance, Carrie M. Best in 1941 and Viola Desmon in 1946 were refused seats on the main floor of Roseland Theatre in Glasgow, Nova Scotia (Permanand, 2019). And in 1914, Charles Daniels was refused tickets for the main floor of Sherman Grand Theatre in Edmonton, Alberta, something that would happen to Lulu Anderson in 1922 when she was refused a ticket to attend the theatre (Permanand, 2019). It is with the above understanding that the Government of Canada (2024) acknowledged the continuity noted early in their anti-racism strategy, *Changing Systems, Transforming Lives: Canada’s Anti-Racism Strategy 2024–2028*, that “*Anti-Black racism has a four-hundred-year history in Canada*” (emphasis added). The report accurately added that “It [ABR] emerged in this country as part of a worldwide history of forcibly removing human beings, with distinct identities, languages, and cultures, from the African continent and subjecting them to slavery across the American continent and beyond.”

Organizational and Institutional Manifestations of ABR Today

Overtly or covertly, the legacy of the above history is prevalent in Canadian institutions and social service organizations today. In legal and law enforcement institutions, African-Canadian youth are stopped, searched, incarcerated, and sentenced to longer jail terms than other non-Indigenous groups in Canada (Anderson, 2022). Uncritically faulting the victims shifts the problem away from institutional histories and policies that create these existential conditions (Schiele, 2017). Within the school system, for instance, this is manifest in higher rate of suspension and expulsion (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2019), less time spent with African-Canadian students who need more academic and social support (Bernard & Smith, 2018) and harsh approach to teenage rebellions (Hairstory, 2019).

In the child welfare system, African-Canadian children are removed from their parents at a higher rate than their Canadian counterparts. These decisions, based on a monocultural, Eurocentric standards

(Asante, 1991), rationalize appropriate Afrocentric parenting practices as either inappropriate or bad (Adjei & Minka, 2018). Some social workers are therefore less circumspect and less investigative when they receive abuse reports from Black families (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020). A rush to decision negatively affects how and where children and youth are placed in the foster care system. Also, youth aging out of the care system into adulthood are considered more prepared than they are because of the adultifying attitude some youth workers have toward African-Canadians.

However, professionals who prioritize and center experiences of African-Canadians are circumspect in their decision-making. They listen and investigate more. Schiele (1997, 2017) has noted this important attitude among social workers with training in Afrocentric paradigm. These professionals improve service provision and relationship with the youth. This is not always the case with mainstream service providers because of “epistemic closure” (Gordon, 2002, p. 2). This is the assumption that one knows everything there is to know about someone or a social group. Epistemic closure (Gordon, 2002) leads to, for instance, a rush to call the police (Hairstory, 2019) or child protection (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020; Adjei & Minka, 2018) without first establishing facts about that specific socio-cultural environment or incident.

Methodology

Given the complexity of the process leading to the Y-X ABR training certificate on whose evaluation findings we have relied, we found it vital to provide these details. They may give the reader a clear picture of the data, how it was obtained and why we used it.

Source of Data

Following the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, then a police officer with the city of Minneapolis, a pronounced demand for more effective anti-Black racism policies, laws and actions was scaled up within the United States and internationally (Beckett & Hankins, 2021). The Canadian government joined this global call to combat ABR and its effects on the mental health of Black Canadians (Government of Canada, 2024). Joining the rest of the world in 2020, Y-X answered this important call by developing with partner agencies a training program to mitigate ABR in the Ontario youth sector. This productive collaboration resulted in February of 2021 in a comprehensive, multi-modular, online, flexible training on Combatting Anti-Black Racism.

CBYW certificate is offered online in 4 modules organized into 17 lectures and two artistic performances. To appreciate the uniqueness of Black Canadians experiences and the history that inspired the certificate, the lectures are delivered mostly, but not exclusively, by African-Canadian researchers, artists, scholars, activists, and service providers.³ The first module is *The Context*. It focuses on the historical context of anti-Black racism in Canada. The second module is about researching *Black youth*, walks training participants through some of the best practices they can use to conduct research among African-Canadian youth. The third module is about critical Practice, which

focuses on how practitioners can prioritize the health of Black youth in youth serving organizations and institutions. The final module, Module 4, accountability for transformative change, challenges training participants to utilize the knowledge they have learned from the certificate to work toward making the sector welcoming and supportive of Black Canadian youth. Transforming the sector inspired this paper.

When the Government of Canada (2021) invested \$100 million to fund projects working toward the mitigation of the mental health of Black Canadians, Y-X received funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada to support Black youth wellbeing through training, knowledge exchange and mobilization. With this funding, Y-X extended the certificate into Beyond ABR training to transformational action, a capacity building and knowledge mobilization and exchange project. The *first* phase of the project is the training certificate, and the *second* phase is the evaluation phase whose qualitative findings provided the data for this paper.

Data Types

As noted above, the qualitative data for the paper is from the evaluation phase of Transformational action (TRAC), divided into four levels. Level 1 assesses how participants responded to the training while Level 2 assesses changes in knowledge levels, attitude and skills after the training. The data for these two levels was obtained through online form provided after the completion of the four modules. Level 3 assesses how training participants utilized the knowledge from the training in the personal and professional lives while Level 4 assesses how they have used the knowledge transformatively in agency policies and practice, for instance. Evaluation data for levels 3 and 4 were obtained through online surveys and online focus groups through Zoom.

Since the focus groups provided more comprehensive responses and interactions among the participants, and online surveys provided individual, non-interactive responses, we have used the data for both focus groups and post-training online surveys. The nine focus groups were facilitated by Y-X research assistants between June and August 2023. To provide the reader with some level of clarity, here are the questions asked at evaluation levels:

Level 1: How did certificate participants experience the certificate? How satisfied are they with the certificate?

Level 2: What do participants perceive as the benefits and learnings they gained from the certificate? What impact does the certificate have on their knowledge, skills and attitudes?

Levels 3: What impact does the certificate have on participants' work with youth? What changes have been implemented in how participants in the certificate engage with Black youth and others in their communities?

Level 4: What has been the impact within organizations? What challenges are encountered at the organizational level? What factors facilitate transformational change within organizations?

Data Analysis

After facilitating the focus groups, the research assistants also transcribed the recorded interviews, anonymized them (using numbers: participant 6, participant 2, etc.), coded them and then thematized the data. A secondary coding and thematization was then performed by author 1 to ensure the data obtained was appropriate for the present paper. To make quotations easy to make sense in explanatory context, Author 1 categorized the focus groups numbers: Focus Group #1, Focus group #2, etc. Both research assistants and author 1 used thematic analysis, which is, according to Kiger and Varpio (2020), “a method for analyzing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns” (p. 847). The three themes are useful in the TRAC project based on what the participants have shared.

Ethics Questions and Informed Consent

Since the evaluation process included data collection, Y-X applied and obtained ethics approval from Y University’s Ethics Office. Y-X also has a proven evaluation program that is recognized by the Research Ethics office at Y University. Additionally, the online, post-training surveys were sent to the participants to complete as a follow-up to their CBTW certificate training. The participants were therefore free to ask questions, complete the survey or refuse to complete it. The survey data collection therefore followed research ethics guidelines specified by the Tri-Council Research conduct for research involving human beings by ensuring that the data obtained through the online surveys is not only consented to by the participants, but that the consent was informed. For the online focus groups, consent forms were provided and the facilitators discussed *informed consent* and that their involvement is voluntary. For their participation in the focus groups, participants were offered honorariums with information included within the consent form. The participants were also given contact information for the academic director of Y-X and Y University Research office for any questions about the focus groups or the purpose for which the data was being collected. During the introductory remarks of the Zoom meetings the facilitators also emphasized the importance of voluntary, informed consent and, again, provided information about honorarium.

Results

Below, we focus on three themes that have emerged from the further analysis of the data beyond the initial thematization by research assistants. These themes are (1) beyond administrative tokenism, (2) culturally appropriate practices, and (3) the prioritization of the voices and experiences of African-Canadian youth. The results therefore answer our research question: What are some of the transformative ABR policies agency leaders can implement to make the youth sector in Ontario welcoming and supportive of Black youth?

Beyond administrative tokenism

Some of our participants have expressed frustrations with agency leaders who attend the training but are reluctant to take the knowledge from the training seriously to support agency policies. As one participant said in focus group #9 about “growing up in a settler colonial white supremacist state... there's a lot of unlearning and unpacking to do.”

But as another participant has noted in the post-training survey, “People in general aren't interested or feel that it's not relevant because there are so few black families in our system.” These workers still work with children and youth from these “few” families. But as this participant has poignantly noted, “despite that there is anti-Black racism.” Faulting Canada’s prized and world-famous multiculturalism (Berry & Grigoryev, 2022) as the reason many Canadian deny the existence and prevalence of racism in Canada, participant 6 in focus group #5 said,

[it] was mind boggling to me that...for some people, they really think that...Canada's a multicultural society. We're so accepting and things like that. It's like no, it's racism embedded in our ideologies. And practices and... you know, I guess it's like, deeply embedded in the policies and everything and so we need to be able to unpack that and take it apart...

If professionals working with African-Canadian youth do not believe racism exists because of Canadian multiculturalism that they somehow believe has abolished racism, these professionals would be less likely to support ABR policies. This denial may be informed by their monocultural education and their social-cultural environments. As participant 2 in focus group #4 noted in their programming, “What we noticed was that a majority of the children who are in the program identify as black...this grew as a need to understand... anti-black racism better.” Scholars, as noted earlier, have stressed that education is a “social phenomenon [so students are prepared] “to become part of a social group” (Asante, 1991, p. 170).

Moving beyond token events, attitude and policies is therefore imperative. As participant 3 has argued in focus group #8, “I think a large part of it is just focusing on celebrating black history month but you know, making it a part of the curriculum and I know a lot of teachers have shifted towards that.” This is a vital reminder. Hosting Black History Month (BHM) adds value to ABR mitigation. Obstacles to ending ABR arise when service agencies, schools, and group homes celebrate BHM as an end-in-itself. Participant 4 in focus group #6 has stressed that more needs to be done internally because combating ABR is a difficult, long-term process that needs putting on

ABR lens on the breadth of service delivery that we offer as well. So there's a lot of things that need to go into it and I think what would be helpful for organizations are kind of, I think, what was mentioned before an audit or a checklist to help identify like some of the primary things, the bigger wins, that will move us along on our journey, recognizing that it's a long journey, and it's not going to be over soon

What the above participant has highlighted is the importance of moving beyond tokenizing and superficial actions that impede policy changes and effectiveness, something participant 4 in focus group #4 has stressed: “I would like to see more unity between the organizations that support black

youth...more emphasis on supporting black youth beyond Black History Month...so anytime a kid wants a resource, they're waiting for February." As participant 5 in focus group #6 has also observed, what is also important in combating ABR is for agencies to look beyond the veneer of normalcy.

And I think in addition to that, as like a non black racialized person, like really trying to understand what sort of solidarity looks like in practice, and where are like the areas that I'm maybe not aware of, or need to do some learning around in terms of my work, specifically with black youth, and then also systemically kind of at our agency.

Participant 5 in focus group #3 has also emphasized oversight as it may lead to tokenistic attitude among senior managers:

A director was saying in a meeting with myself and the black colleague, which was the HR [human resources] process that she was asking the black colleague to write up stuff for Black History Month. Meanwhile, the org [anization] was not even willing to put out a statement for... George Floyd. This was in 2020. They were not even willing to do anything about anti black racism within the org[anization].

A participant in focus group #9, who works with Black youth at a clinical setting, stressed the importance of policy changes beyond the administrative tokenism noted above:

In our clinical programs specifically, you know, clinical psychology in Canada is very Eurocentric, again. It is changing like at our clinic, we have a specific initiative for training clinicians to work with black families, but it's slow and so you know, so much of what is taught are Eurocentric theories that do not consider, like different cultural needs.

According to participant 6 in focus group #1, who works at a school setting in a rural community, moving beyond tokenism involves establishing safe spaces for POC [people of color], but also others that

[are] strictly black, some are with allies, but it's up to those students to voice...who's there and how that it's going to look based in their specific schools. But then we also created conferences for high school students where it was black student conferences, where they got to get together we had keynote speakers, we had workshops, everything centered towards them.

The above initiative may ensure that leaders and professionals working with the youth go beyond what is convenient or what would make their institutions look better without policy and practice changes vital in long-term transformation in the sector. Such policies may encourage agencies to work with African-Canadian communities for a deeper understanding of people and issues (Alicia Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2022). As participant 6 in focus group #1 has emphasized in the context of community engagement,

[we] don't need to take these opportunities to talk about that, that black excellence is there we also like you, we dove into like black community members who have done amazing things and like, showcase that to connect them to where they are [...]

What participant 6 said resonates with what participant 5 in focus group #7 said about hesitation in engaging African-Canadian youth because “There's a fear, they might say the wrong thing, there's a fear, if they're not black, they can't have these conversations.” Participant 5 added that

part of it is the fear that holds back a lot of people of having those courageous spaces and brave spaces where they could start building that relationship. Relational engagement is huge. And having that trust, I think and building that trust, I think sometimes we get so focused on academics and having to push the work, that we forget that that's important too, check ins, and just humanizing our students and really looking at them, you know, holistically, it's not just in the classroom, it's a social determinants of health.

Moving beyond trainings and token hiring practices and policies, as tacitly expressed by the participants, has the potential to lead to needed transformative changes in ending or mitigating ABR. These significant leadership and practice decisions, which have already been adopted by some agencies as clearly related by the participants quoted above, need emphasis and duplication by organizations that work with the youth.

Culturally Appropriate Practices and Leadership

As the participants quoted in the previous section have highlighted, engaging with African-Canadian communities is important in understanding the youth and their issues. Participants have therefore stressed how important it is for their institutional leaders and frontline workers to be mindful of the importance of cultural appropriateness. The presence of services that are not culturally appropriate, or the provision of services to African-Canadian youth by professionals with no “cultural humility training” (Bernard & Smith, 2018, p. 155), may be as good as having no services at all. The cultural attitude adopted toward the youth, which fuels ABR, may be mitigated through culturally informed leadership actions and frontline practices such as listening to students who ask questions:

I think it's very insidious, sometimes, like it's hard to kind of name. I think sometimes the youth kind of express this feeling of lack of connection with their teacher, or lack of understanding. And so I think it's this kind of relational dynamic where the youth is kind of questioning like, is it okay, am I okay, here? (Participant 4, focus group #3)

Participant 7 in focus group #8 echoed this in the context of self-questioning when it comes to cultural appropriateness of decision making and service provision:

[it] came down to that because I've Caribbean descent, the person that we're working with...was kind of issue and they didn't know how to connect with the family interact those little... little cultural nuances that they don't get or because, you know, if they don't trust you or they feel like okay, what are you coming with? We've already been bamboozled by somebody else.

Speaking about the importance of Black Canadian role models, participant 2 in focus group #1 noted that it is important to avoid deficit models in service provision (Authors1, 2023; Bernard & Smith, 2018) to focus on cultural achievements:

And ... when it did start, it tended to be like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Americans. So now we've gotten very specific to Canadians and in fact, we even had a wall of Brampton [Ontario], like, I mean, Brampton, you know, former graduates, so [school board] in the black community that has in their accomplishments, so their pictures went up on the wall and a little blurb about their accomplishments.... (Participant 2, Focus group #1)

What these participants shared echoes the asset-based model, which maintains that every community has resources, narratives, and personalities that can be mobilized for the benefit of the community to avoid projecting such communities as helpless within the deficit model (Schiele, 1997). A teacher and a board member shared in the after-training survey that “My challenge in implementation is combatting the thinking that Black youth are somehow broken and need fixing rather than the systems which serve Black youth.” A program coordinator working directly with African-Canadian youth also said in the after-training survey that they learned “How to have conversations, how to be a moderator, etc. Lessons on how to talk to other cultures and races about anti-black racism.” How to talk to the youth highlights the importance of cultural-centeredness the Afrocentric framework emphasizes (Asante, 2020). This may help challenge conditions that lead to prejudgments and stereotypes these youth face (Bernard & Smith, 2018). A participant in focus group #2 has echoed this regarding the motivation to attend the training:

I was looking for some best practices that I could access at the time I was also working with a group of black youth and a project coordinator type of role. And I wanted to make sure that I wasn't projecting any sorts of harms onto them. Any internalized anti-black racism and so I wanted to use these resources kind of as a mirror to check myself.

As Asante (2020) has noted, there is a “recognition that in the area of human relations there [is] a profound problem of ethics in the Western world that impacted the psychological location of Africans” (p. 153). Cultural representation, which the program coordinator and Asante have stressed, has been echoed by others. Participant 2 in focus group #7 argued that “87.2% of our staff identify as white and female, and very few like less than 11% is racialized. 3% is black.” Participant 7 in focus group #7 added that “Some of the different supports that are really helpful for them include things like access to counseling that has on that lens. So students being able to access black counselors, black mental health workers...” Even when African-Canadian professionals are hired to combat ABR, a participant in focus group #9 argued that “so much of what is taught are Eurocentric theories that do not consider, like different cultural needs.”

The teacher responding in the after-training survey quoted above has also noted the importance of how to “communicate with Black students and families in culturally responsive and respectful ways. Many white people speak to and about Black youth and families in such a negative manner, very condescending and judgmental.” A focus group participant working at a post-secondary institution agrees with this assessment:

Why are we not basing policy and practice on evidence-based research like we know that culturally congruent mentorship benefits the most marginalised across cultural demographics. So my experience

now in a post-secondary institution is like, you know, just to work to create spaces where these conversations can be had and starting from a point where we acknowledge it won't always be comfortable and we won't always get it right. But it's worth doing and growing and, you know, growing from that, hard experience, but also normalizing that systemic racism exists, and it creates huge barriers to access for our students. (Participant 1, focus group #1)

Denial of racism not only exists in Canadian institutions and organizations that work with African-Canadian youth. It is also prevalent. Having uncomfortable conversations about ABR is a quintessence of mitigation processes. Megan Boler (2009) has described this as a “pedagogy of discomfort.” African-American businesswoman, Melody Hobson (TED, 2014) has also described this vital, but uncomfortable, process as “being comfortable being uncomfortable.” A pedagogy of discomfort, Boler (2009) argues, “begins by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relations to how one has learned to perceived others” (p. 176). This is what participant 1 is asking for in the excerpt above: A positive behavioral response to her environment as an inclusive ecology.

Prioritizing Youth Voices and Experiences

Pivoting on the experiences of these youth is one of the issues participants have forcefully expressed in post-training focus groups and survey responses. As one responder has noted in a survey response, “Within my unlearn lessons, I had better understanding of how to incorporate student voice and lived experience.” Mullings et al. (2021) have noted that “social work education had silenced our lived experience and erased our voices from the education and practice spaces” (p. 1). Participant 4 in focus group #3 would agree with this assessment:

Let's start using the vernacular of what it means to be anti black racist and get into the classrooms and do some presentations and just start using some of the developmentally age appropriate language to really target anti black racism. We have to start by labeling it and defining it for students who are experiencing it and students that are creating and acting in a racist way.

Speaking about the importance of youth voices and experiences, participant 2 in focus group #1, who works with the youth in the school, highlighted ABR and decision-making.

Okay, that was...the principal's discretion to suspend. And then I think the equity and the [diversity] community got involved and was like, hey, we need to reevaluate and relook at this. We've also hired within our board seven black graduation coaches in the last two years, and which I've seen like black youth kind of take a big breath like there's a lineup sometimes when the graduation coach comes into the school is like, a relief like wow, somebody's here to actually hear me. Somebody's going to listen to me and hear me somebody who looks like me. Somebody who may understand my you know, my issues.

The same participant added:

The black females in particular, one of their big concerns was I'm tired of being told I'm angry... person. And then...if I just toned my voice down. So I think there's been a lot more education you know, about being toned place. Working from you know, a positive like not a deficit base, but a strength based approach. So I do see us progressing. (Participant 2, focus group #1)

It within this strength-based model that a participant in focus group #2 argued that "I felt so validated by this course... everything I've learned along the way that is inherently within me." When the youth are given the chance to tell their stories and relate their lived experiences, they may feel a sense of belonging, improving the working relationship between the youth and the professionals (Debrosse, Kapo & Metayer, 2023). The value of ABR training is something participant 3 in focus group #5 has also stressed.

So they understood or they understand how to conceptualize how to articulate and communicate their own experiences. And for those who are not black to gain a lens and understand sort of epistemological empathy to the lived experiences of people who do not, do not look like themselves.

Centering African-Canadian youth voices not only dispels deficit narratives (Author, 2023), but may also reduce stereotypes and assumptions (Debrosse, Kapo & Metayer, 2023). Participant 3 in focus group #4 explained how her agency now values the importance of lived experience and cultural perspectives.

I think that my organization does a really good job of bringing in people from different backgrounds and cultures to provide trainings to a certain extent, and they have changed a lot of their policies actually, which I'm very appreciative of, but then what is the work that you're doing to reflect those policies is always my concern, because [there's] a big disconnect there...

Participant 6 in focus group #8 echoed the importance of culture and lived experience:

Instead of focusing on that, in in I think it would be better just listen to the youth themselves, and try to connect to your actual lived experience because they can articulate that normal way that people might presume that they don't have the language or skills or like let me do to share and that's really frustrating, too, because if we just listened and had that openness to change our idea of being kind of like experts in the space and their experience, I think that's problematic. And this what continues this cycle of what was mentioned earlier around sort of empowering versus pushing back into navigating the systems that disempower them.

Prioritizing the experiences and voices of African-Canadian youth may avoids epistemic closure (Gordon, 2002), where some professionals approach these youth as if they know everything there is to know about them. Avoiding epistemic closure, as another participant has noted in the context of African-Canadian parents' and students' voices in school, can reduce or eliminate situations where valuable experiences are downplayed or ignored.

I would say too again, in schools, you know, many daily right, students and families will share their experiences of racism that can look different for in lots of ways from feeling ignored in the classroom, where sometimes kids are streamlined, racialized, and black kids are streamlined into particular courses

and subjects where they may not be feeling listened to around what their actual strengths are and not what the white sort of teacher in front of them is saying their strengths are. (Participant 2, focus group #6)

In a post-training survey, another participant has highlighted how the Y-X training, which centers on the experiences and narrative of African-Canadians from their perspectives.

I have a better understanding when working with my minority students the challenges they are faced with on a daily basis. I challenge them to use their voice and not let it get shut down. I let them know what they have to say is just as important as everyone.

In addition to centering the voices of African-Canadian youth, the participant also empowers them (Authors¹, 2023). This highlights what the participants quoted earlier said about others speaking on behalf of African-Canadian communities and youth. It also encourages idiopathic approaches (Whaley & McQueen, 2020) that are preferred by Afrocentric theoreticians (Mazama, 2000; Asante, 1991) and social workers utilizing Afrocentric social work (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017; Schiele, 2017; Bernard & Smith, 2018; Mullings et al., 2021).

Critical Discussions

For African-Canadian youth, the tough-guy image (Kunsman et al., 2023) and adultification (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2023) have been normalized. This is harmful when these youth are assisted by professionals who downplay, or do not understand, the historical complexities of ABR and its long-term effects on their wellbeing (Hairstory, 2019). This calls, as some participants have noted, for the need to prioritize the experiences and voices of African-Canadian youth with the understanding that Canada is a *multicultural* country informed by a *monocultural* worldview (Asante, 2020). Monoculturalism runs the risk of creating discriminatory, differential treatments. As Bernard and Smith (2018) have noted, “Where differential treatment exists, so too does the value that some are not worthy of the same basic rights awarded to others” (p. 150).

This monocultural world view, which Afrocentric scholars militate against, is captured by the clinician who said that Canadian clinical theories used to help African-Canadian youth “are Eurocentric theories that do not consider... different cultural needs.” These Eurocentric theories, Schiele (2017, 1997) has noted, may not be appropriate when assisting people of African descent. Writing about Africentric [Afrocentric] social work, Bernard and Smith (2018) have argued that “Perspective is a powerful force when framing...discussions” (p. 153). Our research participants have not only emphasized this in their responses, but they have also incorporated it in their policies, practice and programming. The school board that hired African-Canadian *graduation coaches* employed them because they listened to the youth and understand the importance of cultural perspectives.

Prioritizing youth voices and valuing different cultural perspectives is, however, not something that must be assumed exist among professionals in Canadian institutions and social organizations. Given the history related in the ABR section above, and which our research participants have empirically supported,

we need the re-evaluation of how Canadian history is taught. As the results show, the awareness come from training and access to valuable resources and the willingness to access them and operationalized them. Professionals and agency leaders who understand youth experiences but feel unprepared because of lack of anti-ABR skills, enabling policies and positive leaders in their agencies, need supportive leaders and policies that can facilitate access to training.

CBYW is taught from the perspective of African-Canadians, a crucial perspective that has been subjugated in Canadian educational system (Cameron & Jefferies, 2021). As Bernard and Smith (2018) have noted, "Starting with our history we must begin to critically analyze which voices are used to tell our story, and which voices are being excluded" (p. 153). The exclusion of African-Canadians was a proudly operationalized state policy. It was considered the panacea to the scary, phobogenic image (Fanon, 1963) many Canadians had of African-Canadians. The formal removal of racist immigration policies and the painfully gradual deracialization of Canadian institutions has not erased the legacies of that racist, historical consciousness. It has only modified its manifestation. These lingering legacies still buttress ABR in youth-serving organizations and institutions such as schools (Bernard & Smith, 2018).

Teaching African and African-Canadian history from an Afrocentric perspective does not only help remedy the problem, but it may also help ensure that Canada lives by its prized, world-famous multiculturalism not as a public relations state policy but, also, as an intercultural consciousness connecting Canadians across racial and ethnic lines. As Mazama (2000) has noted, as people of African descent, "we do not exist on our own terms but on borrowed, European ones" (p. 387). Agency leaders and professionals should be open to learning from the youth as much as the youth learn from them.

Participants who value this perspective have consulted African-Canadian youth regarding the content of their youth programs. Asante (1991) has noted that this is important in inter-racial understanding and humility in social, cultural and educational discourses. Understanding and humility are vital in combating ABR, and what scholars have called youth *materring* (Gilmore & Bettis 2021). *Mattering*, which our participants have also stressed, and which Afrocentric scholars have recommended, is the operationalization of meaningfully supportive cultural environment within institutions and organizations to make youth *matter*. It is still a challenge in Canada (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2023), but as a participant working with African-Canadians in school has noted, "I do see us progressing." *Mattering* and culturally informed service provision are only possible with effective ABR policies and practices; policies that move beyond mere existence of policies that encourage tokenism (Mugo & Puplampu, 2022).

Our participants have therefore shown that faulting African-Canadians for the traumatizing and marginalizing experiences whose causal factors are outside their control and which re-enforces race-based traumatic stress injuries (Carter et al., 2020), may be avoided through effective training and prioritization of youth experiences and voices. Training and change in perspective also avoid the trivialization of effects of race-based traumas that stems from ABR. With this perspective, the youth may not be asked to normalize negative experiences as tragic but unavoidable dynamics of what the

intellectual and political right calls *the real world*. These professionals are not exposed to dehumanizing racist incidents (Bernard & Smith, 2018).

Agency leaders who deny or mask the existence of ABR in Canada see no need for ABR mitigating policies. Leaders who acknowledge the existence of ABR but do not believe its effects on the youth are worthy of agency funds and time may establish tokenizing policies that only become performative public relations facades (Mugo & Puplampu, 2022). Additionally, agency leaders who implement policies because they believe in the existence of ABR and its effects on African-Canadian youth may still face challenges ensuring that their policies are effective and transformative in the long term. What we have shown in this paper is that the above problems may be remedied if ABR trainings are taken seriously, and agency and institutional policies moved beyond tokenism.

Policy Recommendations

Based on what the participants have shared, we recommend that (1) agencies prioritize training from Africa-descended scholars, activists and artists. We also recommend that (2) African-Canadian communities should always be consulted in policy and programming processes. They may not have solutions, but they may share perspectives that may help agency leaders change or modify their programs and policies. We also recommend that (3) professionals who work with African-Canadian youth and their agency leaders acquaint themselves with African-Canadian history and Canada's racial past. Participatory Action Research (PAR) with the youth may be helpful. This may help agency leaders notice racist policies, attitudes and incidents they may normally overlook.

Conclusion

Ending ABR requires informed, heightened sense of self-reflexivity. Dominant social groups such as European-Canadians do not always self-interrogate because their worldview and ideals inform the society in which they live. When cultural dominance is questioned, they may respond through a nuanced intellectual resistance or condescension or with overt hostility (Mullings et al., 2020). What has become obvious is that ABR continues to exist because of the reluctance or the inability by organizations working with African-Canadian youth to acknowledge the Eurocentric legacy of the institutions within which they work. Canadians take it for granted that Canada was established as a European *colony* and transitioned into a European *country*, especially English and French. Since education is also a socializing mechanism (Asante, 1991; Bernard & Smith, 2018), teaching history (Asante, 2000) is quintessential to the self-reflexivity required by ABR mitigation. Racism and Canada as a European country were enshrined in laws and policies and the consciousness of European-Canadians. Mata (1978) was right to say that racism was the immigration policy because immigration was integral to nation-building especially the policing of racial composition of Canada. Between 1970s and late 1990s, European-Canadian were still struggling to come to terms with a formally deracializing Canadian society. They resisted it racial inclusion, at times violently (Cannon, 1995). While the justice and law enforcement institutions were in the news regarding their racism, other Canadian institutions were not always in the news. This may have given Canadian the impression that racism disappeared immediately state racial

policies were abandoned in the 1960s (Authors1, 2023). The rarity of overt racism is perhaps why some Canadians believe ABR does not exist in Canada.

But the acuteness of ABR is manifest when a teacher tells an African-Canadian high school student that the word racism should not be uttered in class and that slaves were treated with kindness by slave masters (CBC News, 2022). ABR is also manifest when a European-Canadian boss working for the federal government jokes to an African-Canadian woman about the “good old days of slavery” (CBC News, 2021). The teacher believed she was stating a historical fact (understood from the perspective of the slave master) and the federal employee believed he was only making a joke. What they did not consider is the effect of their words. Being from the dominant group, they take their worldview for granted; as universal, as too obvious not to be understood as they intended it. When advised to attend mitigation training, they may resist or express displeasure (DiAngelo, 2018). For instance, one participant who attended *CBYW* trainings said “It was racist against those who are not black in society; specifically racist towards whites.” This is the problem with monocultural (Asante, 1991) view of Canadian realities. It stems from the inability to appreciate Canada’s racist past that ABR mitigation is trying to redress. It also stems from the inability to take African-Canadians seriously when they speak about their lived experiences with discrimination.

This is the historical legacy that assumed Africans were people to be studied not people whose views were valuable to society. We witness this legacy today in institutions such as school (Bernard & Smith, 2018), youth group homes, law enforcement institutions (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2023) and child welfare (Adjei & Minka, 2018). Here, their complaints are not taken seriously, their fights are automatically criminalized, and their raised voices (even happy ones) become nuisance. ABR trainings may put this into context to avoid what one participant described as “white people speak [ing] to and about Black youth and families in such a negative manner, very condescending and judgmental.” What agency leaders can learn from what the participants have shared is that mitigating ABR is our collective Canadian obligation as it helps create working ecologies that make Canada a better place for all Canadians (Bernard & Smith, 2018).

Notes

1. While will use Black and African-Canadian interchangeably, we will use “European-Canadian” and “European-American” instead of “white American” and “White Canadian.” The use of such appellations is within the Afrocentric framework that supports culture-based and place-based identities instead of color-based identities.
2. For the sake of anonymity in peer-review, the link to the *CBYW* is be provided after the review process.
3. The list of presenters is available.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Author 1 (K) conceptualized the paper and wrote the first draft. Author 2 (A) reviewed the first draft and provided feedback about content and structure. These were incorporated by author 1 into the second draft. Authors 3-7 reviewed the paper and provided feedback during manuscript review meetings and in subsequent email exchanges. This feedback, which included conceptual questions, terminologies ("Black" vs. African-Canadians, for instance), content and relevance of the abstract, and theory, improved the second draft.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the Y-X's staff and the research assistants that facilitated the online focus groups, transcribed, coded and thematized the evaluation data. We would also like to thank Y-X partner agencies and the presenters/trainers who made *CBYW certificate* possible. Finally, we extend our gratitude to Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) whose funding made this work possible.

Data Availability

The focus groups data that informed this manuscript is available at YouthREX. The corresponding author and YouthREX provincial director, can provide the information to researchers who are interested in data.

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