

YOUTH SPACES REPORT

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The Students
Commission
*Centre of Excellence for
Youth Engagement*



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Introduction

This paper champions the value of youth spaces within school settings in improving key outcomes for disengaged youth. It was developed in response to requests from the Collective Impact for Toronto Youth's (CITY) neighbourhood clusters' diverse partners. CITY utilizes a collective impact framework to increase graduation rates of racialized youth; we do so by facilitating the development of an integrated system of care and support with diverse partners to improve the quality and sustainability of support available to racialized youth. "While not necessarily new, collaborative efforts increasingly seem necessary to address the complex challenges facing students, schools, and communities today. For many persistent problems in education and community well-being, root causes and needs are multifaceted and straightforward solutions do not exist" (Henig, Riehl, Houston, Rebell, & Wolff, 2016). Consequently, we cannot begin to elevate academic achievement for young people, without addressing the root causes that prevent them from fully participating in their education. Furthermore, analysis and interventions need to be devised through an intersectional lens that looks at how barriers related to education, economic resources, justice, safety, health and engagement intersect to impact a young person's life. In recognition of these realities, CITY works to address key youth outcomes across various areas of youth well-being and create synergy between family, school and community efforts at the neighbourhood level and city-wide system level.



One promising approach that CITY believes can significantly improve educational experiences for racialized youth, furthest from opportunities, is by investing in youth spaces *on school grounds, during school hours*. CITY asserts that youth spaces designed in partnership with youth and service providers, and that intentionally promote key youth outcomes, can positively impact the well-being of young people facing multiple barriers. While youth spaces have garnered significant attention in recent years, they tend to be focused on leisure and recreation spaces within various municipal and community settings and with programming happening after-school, and during evenings and weekends. This paper seeks to focus the dialogue on collaborative youth spaces within schools, open during school hours. Youth spaces within schools offers a critical opportunity for alienated and disengaged youth to be reacquainted with the school community and build strong relations which positively impacts their education goals.

This paper engages in a brief discussion on the intersectionality of racialized youth barriers and situates it within the local context. It then outlines the benefits of youth spaces within schools and concludes with considerations for policy and practice.



“SBL has impacted me in a way that it gives me a place to escape from my problems. I have a strong connection with the staff, and it’s like my mini home within the school.”

– Kherto Ahmed, Mentor

Situating Racialized Youth Realities and the Interconnected Nature of their Barriers to Success

Young people, particularly those furthest from opportunities, face many complex barriers to achieving academic success and graduation. To oversimplify, students who are hungry, feeling threatened at school, working to support the family, coping with discrimination, or managing depression are not in a position to focus on their school work. Unfortunately, many Toronto students are faced with these and other barriers daily, without access to the supports they need. Racialized youth in particular, have significantly lower graduation rates than the TDSB average, with some groups more than 30% below parity (TDSB, 2014).

In the Province’s recent Poverty Reduction Strategy, Ontario committed, “to excellence for all students, supporting student wellbeing both in and outside of the classroom, and creating an equitable education system where all youth — regardless of their circumstances — feel welcomed and included” (Ontario, 2014). School belonging is key to the relationship between student motivation and academic success, particularly for African-American and Latin American students (Faircloth, 2005). However, in the TDSB, students of West African and Caribbean background are less likely than their peers, to feel their school is a safe and welcoming place (TDSB, 2015).

The lack of safe, engaging and welcoming space for young people in Toronto is well known (Johnston, 2013; City of Toronto, 2014; Hart, 2013; Romoff, 2014). The SPACE Coalition “has long recognized the importance of providing space for all residents but has noted with concern that...youth face particular barriers when it comes to accessing space and programming.” (Johnston, 2013). This same recognition is mirrored in Toronto’s (2014) Youth Equity Strategy which plainly states, “[y]outh in Toronto lack consistent and reliable access to safe spaces.”

“We have such a diverse student population that we need different spaces for all our students to learn and have his/her needs met.”

– Rejini Mathai, Teacher

This gap has not gone overlooked. In fact, a growing body of evidence and support from both the Province and the City of Toronto points to the value of integrated service delivery models, such as *community hubs* and *youth spaces* (Brillinger, 2015; Pitre, 2015; Romoff, 2014; Hart, 2013). Karen Peitre’s report for the province on community hubs “has received broad support from stakeholders and has been endorsed by the Premier and the Minister of Education” (Brillinger, 2015). At the same time, the City approved the addition of ten enhanced Community Recreation youth lounges in the 2014 Operating Budget, with a three-year implementation plan (Romoff, 2014). These efforts are laudable and will have significant benefit for young people. However, we need to envision youth spaces not only within the community setting, but also within the school, during school hours.

St. Michael’s Hospital’s Centre for Research on Inner City Health (CRICH) did an extensive assessment of youth needs in Weston and Mt. Dennis, two of the City’s Neighbourhood Improvement Areas. Among the gaps highlighted, is the “lack of sense that school is a community hub, with space for youth to use” (CRICH, 2012, p.4). This is mirrored by the United Way, which emphasizes that adding youth spaces in places that already have some existing services and infrastructure, such as community centres and schools, holds the most significant value for young people (Hart, 2013). There is great value to housing a youth space *within a school*, particularly for racialized students already facing barriers to their education.



“having a youth space in a school setting is important because they offer opportunities for kids to learn new skills, explore different areas of talent, and get support for areas they aren’t strong in.”

– Destiny Gray, Mentor, youth

Youth spaces in schools can offer a much-needed sanctuary for young people who are not having positive educational experiences. As highlighted in the City’s Youth Equity Strategy, “[i]nequitable access to education further marginalizes youth most vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime” (City of Toronto, 2014). A safe, welcoming and engaging space within the school can provide students with the diverse supports and services they need to eventually re-enter the classroom. With motivation to increase graduation rates and decrease suspensions/expulsions, there has been an increase in diversionary measures that keep what would have been former expelled students within in the school (Rushowy & Rankin 2013). However, maintaining presence in school does not necessarily mean these young people are engaged in their education. Although they are still within the school, the quality of young people’s experience there may lead to further disengagement and academic difficulties. Whether in the hallways or in detention-like spaces, unstructured time without opportunities for skill-building, positive interactions with adults, or an established positive social context,

predicts academic problems and involvement in crime (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004). Youth spaces within schools, equipped with the capacity to address the intersectional barriers facing youth are well positioned to re-engage these students through diverse programming and support.

Benefits of youth spaces in schools

School-based youth spaces lead to improved academic outcomes for students, including:

- Higher graduation rates
- Higher GPAs
- Improved retention and lower dropout rates
- Higher motivation for learning

These outcomes are related to youth spaces that promote positive social connections within the school, provide safe and engaging spaces for students, and increase school belonging.

Positive social connections

Young people who are disengaged from school are at-risk of not graduating or being pushed out. Often, it is a cumulative process of alienation and withdrawal. Youth spaces are critical for fostering connections to people in the school. Strong social connections in the school with both peers and adults are key predictors of student engagement (Perdue, Manzeske, & Estell, 2009), higher graduation rates and retention (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Zaff, Donlan, Gunning, Anderson, McDermott, & Sedaca, 2016).



“the space for me has been very useful because SBL brings in outside people who help me with homework. I take university classes and sometimes need help and SBL provides that. SBL also has amazing staff and has a really homey environment. I feel like I belong”

– Darren Aning, Youth Mentor

In youth spaces, students get to know each other in a positive social context, motivating one another and providing a buffer against the difficulties they face in school (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Holopainen, Lappalainen, Juntilla, & Savolainen, 2011). Peer relationships within the school are increasingly important as young people get older; peer relationships become more complex and more influential on young people’s school engagement and academic outcomes (Li, Lynch, Calvin, Liu & Lerner, 2011). Building relationships with peers who feel connected to school and have high academic aspirations is directly related to academic achievement (Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Ryabov, 2011; Zaff et al., 2016).

“SBL has honestly been one of, if not the best experience of my life... SBL gave me the opportunity to be a leader, and led me to realize how many leadership characteristics I have, but never had the opportunity to exercise. I gained an immense level of confidence after working with SBL, and they made sure to encourage me and reward me for my hard work every single step of the way. SBL has molded me into a much better person than I was before entering it, and I will always feel indebted to them. I am now attending York University. SBL gave me bursaries at my grade 12 graduation that helped me with my York tuition. Since SBL took place at York, I know most of the campus inside out. I have connections with York teaching staff, and even the head of my educational department because of SBL.”

– Devindra Ramoutar, Former SBL Mentor



Relationships with adults in the school are just as significant. Often, it is the consistent and caring encouragement of an adult in the school that lets young people know that they can achieve their goals and that they belong. Encouraging invitations from adults to participate in the school play a particularly important role for racialized youth farthest away from opportunities (Chinwé, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). Adult connections that are accessible and support young people’s autonomy are related to improved grades, confidence and motivation for learning, and enhanced school belonging even for students at-risk for dropout (Hafen et al., 2012; McMahon et al., 2008; Zaff et al., 2016). As classrooms get bigger and teachers’ capacity is stretched, adult allies in school-based youth spaces play an increasingly important role.

“SBL has impacted not only [me] but a lot of other people. Personally being a part of SBL helped me make friends and form relationships with supportive adults. SBL has been a big part of my growth through high – school”

– Destiny Gray, SBL Mentor

“SBL guides youth every step of the way. They provide them with academic help, personal tutors, and a space to just chill and relax in. They also go out of their way to accommodate any child, and bring them in with an atmosphere that feels no less welcoming than the atmosphere of a warm family. SBL also has bursaries that they give every year to grade 12 graduates that have been a part of the program, and they don’t stop helping there. They frequently keep in contact with their youth and ensure that they can help them in any way possible. There are always amazing opportunities that SBL is offered, and they ensure that youth in the school capitalize on these opportunities.”

– Devindra Ramoutar, Former SBL Mentor



“They stop a lot of conflicts, they get kids to class ready to learn, provide extra help from tutors for the youth, and they also have conversations with teachers to make sure the students are always on track”

– Shaughnessy, Mentor, youth

Sanctuary and engagement

School spaces that provide a sanctuary for students, increase student engagement and retention. Schools are sanctuaries when they provide physical, emotional, psychological and cultural safe spaces; foster a sense of community; and have consistent and fair rules (O’Gorman, Salmon, & Murphy, 2016). When schools do not provide safe spaces, young people experience violence, discrimination and fear, putting them at greater risk of dropping out. This is especially the case for racialized youth furthest away from opportunities (Peguero, 2011; Wong, Eccles & Sameroff, 2003). Further, students who feel fear in their school are more likely to carry weapons into the school, regardless of community factors or community-based safe spaces (Watkins, 2008). According to young people, safe spaces in schools, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, are needed as a haven from perceived hostility or exclusion in the school environment (Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, & Drechsler, 2012). If supported, these spaces have the potential to shift the school climate. For some youth, these spaces are the only thing keeping them in school. High quality school-based and non-school-based extracurricular activities affect graduation and continued enrollment. They complement one another and ensure that all young people have high quality opportunities in multiple contexts. The qualities of the program are more important than how often youth attend in predicting academic outcomes. If young people get to use their skills, and find it challenging, important, interesting and enjoyable, they are more likely to have positive academic outcomes (Shernoff, 2010). Autonomy-supportive spaces - where young people have meaningful choices and are involved in planning and decision-making - are related to improved school performance and grades, greater autonomous motivation for learning and deeper cognitive processing (e.g., Hafen et al., 2012; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

“I got to learn more about the students because in that space they felt comfortable and I even had the opportunity to play table tennis with them. Seeing a teacher outside a classroom and engaging these students through sports and discussions helps us to get a more holistic picture of our students.”

– Current VP at C.W.Jefferys C.I.

School belonging

When young people have spaces where they connect to others in their school, are involved in school activities, and feel included without discrimination, they are more likely to feel like they belong. School belonging is connected to increased academic engagement (McMahon et al., 2008; Van Ryzin, Gravely & Roseth, 2009), academic achievement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005), and is predictive of better attendance, higher GPA, school completion rates and increased likelihood of college graduation (Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Tillery, Varjas, Roach, Kuperminc & Meyers, 2013; Van Ryzin, Gravely & Roseth, 2009). Ultimately, school-based youth spaces foster school belonging.

“I was in SBL for 3 years now and SBL helped me so much academically, socially, and mentally. Any issue I had SBL helped me through it all. They never gave up on me. I can honestly say I would’ve failed a lot of classes without SBL. Now I just started grade 11 and already have 18 credits.”

– Shaughnessy, Mentor, youth

“It is important to have a youth space within a school setting because it allows students to be themselves while being at school. It gives the youth the opportunities to meet new people and create relationships”.

– Kherto Ahmed, Mentor, youth



Vision of Youth Spaces in Schools

Our vision of an inclusive and impactful youth space in schools involves meaningful youth engagement in the design and ongoing programming of the space, along with the presence of consistent adult allies, and a supportive community network to meet the dynamic needs of various youth (Khanna et al, 2014, Romoff 2014). At present, adult-centered understandings of youth engagement and participation dominate practices of youth engagement, often resulting

in disrespectful and tokenistic methods of youth inclusion that can alienate and deter adult civic engagement (O’Toole, 2003). We posit that youth spaces in schools be designed in partnership with young people, with their notions of participation and engagement defining its spatial formation. Strong relationships can be fostered in working with young people from a participatory youth development model that engages youth as agents of change in addressing the social issues in their communities (Sutton, 2007).

“I’ve developed relationship with students beyond the classroom setting and watched them grow into responsible citizens”

– Lydian Johnson, High School Teacher, adult

“It is important to have a youth space within the school because anytime the teacher doesn’t understand me or want to listen to me, SBL always has my back. They will always provide students with all the supplies that you need. They also have snacks that would give you the head start for the day.”

– Shaughnessy, Mentor, youth

“Because students need support @ school as much as they would at home or in the community.”

– Vanessa D., Mentor, youth



Conclusion

This paper emphasized the value of youth friendly spaces situated within the school environment itself. Underachieving youth are often understood to be disengaged and are positioned outside the civic space; however, the manner in which these young people attempt to engage and build their own ways of belonging, such as within the school, are not often understood or recognized (Arnot, 2012). Youth spaces within schools that are open and inclusive

to all youth, hold the potential for those experiencing marginalization to practice citizenship within these spaces and strengthen their ties to school and community belonging, which can contribute to improving their educational outcomes and overall success.

However, due to various systemic reasons, current school board policy frameworks, such as the practices around partnership and space function in opposition to the development of such youth friendly spaces. Greater dialogue on these systemic level barriers around youth focused spaces within existing schools is required.

We recommend that the value of youth spaces within schools be recognized and embedded within policy frameworks in a systemic manner. In addition, we advocate for the implementation of youth spaces in schools, beginning with the prioritization of high needs schools but with the vision that all youth have access to inclusive youth spaces in their schools.

The CITY initiative intends to facilitate conversations on this issue with key players across the City to improve disengaged student's connectivity to the school environment, which can positively influence their educational goals.



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