

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Reports - 2018

A comprehensive guide to enhancing RPSM's delivery of programs to the Jane and Finch community

Evelyn Amponsah and Eden Abraham

What is this research about?

The most recent census demographics for the Jane and Finch community tell us that 20.1 percent of school-aged children and youth identify as being Black. More broadly, data demographics also make it clear that Racialized children and youth overwhelmingly make up the school-aged population in the Jane and Finch community. There has been surmounting evidence to suggest that Black students experience significantly poorer educational outcomes when compared to their White peers as a result of systemic and institutional racism. That is, Black youth are more likely than other students to drop out of high school, to be suspended, to be streamed into applied rather than academic programs, and face higher unemployment rates. It is vital that programs that seek to improve the educational outcomes of Black and marginalized youth center the overwhelming influence that systemic racism in general and anti-Black racism in particular have on creating and sustaining these inequities. This project asks the question of what systemic and institutional barriers require redress for RPSM to best reach, serve and engage Black students within RPSM's community music education programming.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers conducted a robust literature review that illuminated best practice implications for community based programs that seek to support racialized and marginalized young people. Researchers also reviewed RPSM's Employee Training Manual using an anti-oppressive lens. The researchers had hoped to facilitate a community consultative process with RPSM's students, parents, staff, and faculty that would then inform the development of substantive anti-oppressive practices and policies. However, as a result of complications regarding ethics approval and COVID-19 we were unable to do so. The researchers will continue to engage with RPSM through their Diversity Working Group.

What you need to know

Regent Park School of Music (RPSM) is a community music school that provides music programming to young people that reside in the City of Toronto's priority neighbourhoods, specifically, the Regent Park and Jane and Finch community. They seek to enrich the lives of young people ages 3-18 by providing subsidized quality music education. RPSM endeavours to mitigate financial barriers to quality music education to increase music education access to those that might not have access otherwise. Their work endeavours to have a transformative impact on the lives of diverse young people through their music education programming. This project seeks to support the mandate of RPSM by unearthing and amplifying knowledge that can help RPSM to mitigate the insidious impacts that power imbalances, racism specifically anti-black racism, and cultural biases can have on racialized students learning outcomes

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What did the researchers find?

After reviewing RPSM's "Employee Training Manual" we have identified that the organization and the work that they do would strongly benefit from the development of an accessible, readable anti-oppression policy. As it currently stands, the manual is bereft of a substantive explication of how to work with young people in a way that minimizes power imbalances. There is the inclusion of a short "non-discrimination" sentence which states that employees should not be discriminated against by the organization but very little in the way of equipping faculty and staff to work with students from an anti-oppressive framework. RPSM's "The Creative Curriculum" has been identified as a training tool that would benefit from analysis from an anti-racist, anti-oppressive framework.

The literature review yielded several relevant findings for RPSM. These include the following:

- 1) Utilizing hip-hop, contemporary music, and other culturally relevant forms of music in a meaningful way that does not tokenize or essentialize, can help to better engage and reach young people in urban communities
- 2) White teachers tend to emphasize white middle-class standards of behavior and academic performance even with non-white, low-income students. Research illustrates the harmful and alienating impact that this can have on non-white, low-income students
- 3) The inclusion of a mentoring program embedded within a community music program can fortify positive outcomes
- 4) Newcomer children, despite language barriers, experience many positive benefits from being engaged in community music program
- 5) It is important to use an anti-oppression lens to understand, the reasons marginalized youth access music programs and ensure instructors are capable of creating spaces that respond to the needs of the youth in those space
- 6) RPSM might be able to further increase parent participation through the development of a strong parent volunteer initiative that aims to facilitate more parent interaction in programming. In this scenario, cultural capital is exchanged among fellow parents, educators and students who are interacting whilst still coming from various identities and social space
- 7) Community spaces and programs in marginalized communities need to explicitly account for violent happenings and have resources on site to better help youth navigate. RPSM can have referral based counseling and grieving services offered that are accessible and well advertised to the participating students.
- 8) RPSM can implement a social justice framework by running a campaign similar to that of the Voicing & Action initiative that the marching band participated in, in East Cleveland. Such a campaign would help shed light on structural inequities faced by marginalized voices participating in the program and also heighten the sense of community among participants

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How can you use this research?

This research can be used by community based programs and initiatives that seek to meaningfully engage and impact young racialized people living in low-income neighbourhoods within a North American context.

About the researchers

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Keywords

Community music programs, Black youth, anti-Black racism, community programs, low-income youth

About the Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

The Helen Carswell Chair represents a partnership between York University and Regent Park School of Music (RPSM). All faculty and graduate students of the university are encouraged to collaborate with RPSM on special projects that are aimed at improving community music programming and curriculum for children in the Jane and Finch neighborhood and beyond.

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