

# Exploring Empowering Education for Marginalized Youth in Toronto

## Executive Summary

This research project is an attempt to further the basis of knowledge on key issues regarding schools and marginalized youth in Toronto, with the goal of providing effective and suitable community based responses to building alternative approaches to education. The report is premised on two assertions: 1) Inequalities are a reality in the existing education system, particularly for Black and Native youth, suggesting a need for more relevant and engaging forms of education, and; 2) Alternative education has the potential to act as a liberating and positive force in the lives of marginalized young people.

The project was carried out through **For Youth Initiative (FYI)**, a Toronto based youth organization, with funding from the Department of Justice's National Crime Prevention Strategy program. The project consists of two major components, including a qualitative research study and an accompanying workshop manual.

The research begins with an extensive literature review, which was used to inform the primary research carried out for this project. The literature review provides an overview of relevant academic papers, articles and books, as well as other community reports. The literature presented a considerable wealth of information on the major issues, with an emphasis on alternatives to traditional education. Past research reviewed in this study highlighted key issues for consideration in planning the qualitative stage of the research, including: conceptual dimensions, such as empowerment, gender and race, as well as content dimensions such as curriculum, involvement of students in their learning, use of Indigenous knowledge, community and parental involvement, alternative approaches to teaching and alternative approaches to assignments.

The qualitative research is presented following the literature review. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with Black and Aboriginal youth, including both those currently attending secondary schools and those who had dropped out. Interviews were also held with educators involved in alternative education. The focus groups and interviews provided a considerable wealth of information. Participants were more than willing to engage with the issues explored in this study, therefore allowing for a rich discussion of the research results. Key issues identified in this study include:

- **Terminology:** The terminology of ‘empowerment’ and ‘marginalization’ was mostly confusing and unfamiliar to youth participants. However, when the meanings of the terms were explained, many of the participants were able to relate to and make use of the concepts, leading to an interesting dialogue.
- **Experiences with the Education System:** Public school systems have failed many of the Black and Aboriginal youth who participated in this study. A significant number of participants described personal experiences of racism within the education system. While some schools have made efforts, interviews with youth suggest that there is a lack of consistency in programming and supports to accommodate a diverse student base from school to school.
- **Visioning the Ideal Teacher:** Supportive teachers with a positive attitude towards their students go a long way to assist marginalized students to succeed and engage with their education. Several of the youth participants in this study recalled the impact of specific teachers who developed positive relationships with them. By the same token, negative teacher attitudes had a powerful discouraging impact. Participants want to be supported academically in order to reach their full potential. Efforts should be made to ensure options for higher education remain open for marginalized youth.
- **Visioning the Ideal Classroom:** There was strong agreement among both educators and youth participants that curriculum should do a better job of incorporating and reflecting ethnic and racial diversity. Youth participants, particularly Native youth, felt that existing course materials paint an incomplete and inaccurate picture of the role of First Nations in Canadian history. The use of media and pop-culture in the focus groups demonstrated the effective potential of this approach through the strong responses generated by participants. Youth participants in the study demonstrated a keen interest in the possibility of being actively involved in their education. Participants advocated flexibility and creativity in the design of assignments, in order to make use of students varying strengths and interests.
- **Visioning the Ideal School:** A number of the youth participants suggested activities should be sought out to make the school a more positive, fun and welcoming place. Both educators and youth participants in this study believed schools should be more active in involving the community and parents.

The final section of this study includes a preliminary discussion of recommendations and next steps that could flow from this research. Recommendations focus on the potential role of community youth based organizations, and include:

- Delivering educational programming outside of the limitations and parameters of the mainstream school system
- Providing supplementary ‘courses’ through workshops in schools and community agencies that focus on life skills and anti-racist approaches to course work

- Producing supplementary educational materials to be delivered in schools or a community-based setting (such as the workshop manual produced by For Youth Initiative (FYI) to accompany this study)
- Build partnerships with schools in order to become involved as a community partner in education by providing guest-speakers and information to students on services offered in the community.
- Inform programming and workshop delivery based on the experiences and recommendations of youth and educators who participated in this study
- Become involved in advocating on behalf of individual students and the needs and issues identified by marginalized youth, such as revised curriculum and heritage programs, with the school boards, trustees, the City and the province
- Develop flexible, creative and alternative learning models and projects without assuming homogeneity among young people, or among young people who share a similar cultural background
- Create a partnership with school board equity departments in order to develop a list of 'Best Practices' to ensure equity across Toronto School Board schools

For more information about this study, or to obtain a copy of the report please contact:

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