

AN EVALUATION OF THE

LIFE EDUCATION PROGRAM



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Introduction

“A disproportionate number of Black patients are represented in CAMH’s forensic units” (CAMH, 2023, p.2). Exploring the influence of racial disparities on mental health, Fante-Coleman and Jackson-Best (2020) emphasize that in spite of the Canadian mental healthcare system's claimed universality, Black children and adolescents often face significant barriers in accessing mental health services. The researchers shed light on the multifaceted barriers Black youth face in accessing care. These barriers span various levels, including systemic challenges like prolonged wait times, restricted access to healthcare providers, geographical limitations, and financial hurdles. On the practitioner side, issues such as racial discrimination, lack of cultural competency, and inadequate organizational support further complicate access to care.

Moreover, they state that personal and community factors, including internalized and community-level stigma, play a significant role. Other studies support the findings that health disparities are notably pronounced between individuals who identify as either Black or white (Veenstra, 2019). For example, a survey by Chiu et al. (2018) in Ontario indicated that between 2001 and 2014, only 38.3% of Black Canadians with fair or poor self-reported mental health sought mental health services, compared to 50.8% of white Canadians. Cénat (2022) argues that these disparities stem from negative attitudes towards mental health services, self-stigmatization, and experiences of discrimination and racism in care settings. Anderson et al. (2015b) found that Afro-Caribbean Ontarians have a longer delay in receiving evidence-based services for psychosis than their white peers. Such issues are particularly acute in communities with increased familial, financial, and social pressures (Racine et al., 2020), highlighting the importance of focusing on prevention and early intervention for youth.

The Black Experience Project (2017) noted that in Ontario, Black communities are more likely to report stress and poorer mental health compared to others but demonstrate significant resilience against social factors that heighten the risk of mental illness. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic's toll on Black communities, alongside the

killing of George Floyd, spotlighted the significant consequences Black residents of Toronto face due to structural and systemic anti-Black racism permeating institutions, communities, and workplaces (Black Health Alliance, 2019). A survey by Statistics Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that Black community members reported lower self-assessed mental health and greater financial instability compared to their white counterparts (Moyser, 2020). Furthermore, Senior et al. (2022) reported that youth from racialized communities were at a heightened risk of mental health issues due to more frequent encounters with adversity, stress, and treatment barriers compared to their white counterparts. Racine et al. (2020) found that in the first year of the pandemic, about one in four youths globally showed signs of significant depression, and one in five exhibited substantial anxiety symptoms. Post-pandemic, these figures have increased, underscoring the need for enhanced global mental health services.

The work of King et al. (2021) provides valuable insights into fostering health equity. Their comprehensive analysis underscores the urgency for culturally attuned and targeted interventions, aiming to mitigate the long-standing difficulties Black Canadians encounter. A key aspect of their findings was the necessity of confronting the criminalization of Black Canadians and the promotion of mental health services that are culturally appropriate. The Substance Abuse Program for African Canadian and Caribbean Youth (SAPACCY) at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) provides Africentric and racial trauma-informed support to Black youth dealing with mental health and substance abuse, providing services like assessments, therapy, and counseling to facilitate harm reduction and support recovery (CAMH, 2022). The program's long-standing success is attributed to its collaborative efforts with youth, their families, and the community, all while being deeply rooted in Africentric principles and trauma-informed care. SAPACCY acknowledges that systemic anti-Black racism poses a significant barrier to Black patients and their families seeking care, both at CAMH and throughout the healthcare system (CAMH, 2022). The program's expansion into satellite locations in Toronto, Peel, Hamilton, Ottawa and Windsor has been a key part of CAMH's commitment to addressing the calls to action outlined in their "Dismantling

Anti-Black Racism strategy” within the hospital and the wider healthcare landscape (CAMH, 2022).

Construction of Black Males in Education

Recognizing intersectionality and the existence of communities within communities, factors such as gender, immigration status, sexual identity, age, disability, and historical context are crucial in shaping individuals' experiences with anti-Black racism. These intersectional identities significantly impact their ability to access health and social services (Black Health Alliance, 2019.). Black youth still face considerable challenges in accessing necessary mental health support rooted in systemic inequality, racial discrimination, profiling, microaggressions, biases, and racism (Lucente et al., 2022). The impact of these factors on mental health is profound, leading to a range of issues, including psychological distress, PTSD, depression, anxiety, OCD symptoms, low self-esteem, chronic stress, substance abuse, and higher school dropout rates (Paradies, 2006).

Brown (2017) highlighted the persistent challenges faced by Black males, who remain a focal point in public discourse for two key reasons. Firstly, there has been little change over the past five decades in addressing the injustices they face, including high drop-out rates, enrollment in applied-level courses, placement in special education, high incarceration rates, and deaths resulting from violent crime. The second reason is the alarming number of deaths due to police brutality, with CBC News (2018) reporting that more than 460 people have died in encounters with police in Canada since 2000, the majority of whom suffered from mental health problems—all of them Black males. This has spurred a national conversation on the unjust targeting of Black males both inside and outside of schools. Ferguson (2002) argued that a "central element of a racist discursive formation is the production of subjects as essentially different because of their race" (p. 79). Brown (2017) expanded on this concept, emphasizing the role of historical discourses of race in shaping the construction of Black males.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic and increased attention on police violence against Black men have brought mental health issues, particularly in Black communities, into sharper focus (Brown, 2017) and has helped to reduce the stigma. In today's society, the intersection between racial injustice and mental well-being is strikingly evident. While Canada has made strides in mental health support, racialized communities still grapple with the enduring impacts of historical trauma, as a result of factors such as enslavement, colonialism, oppression, racism, high unemployment rates, and limited access to medical services. Between 2000 and 2017, Toronto saw 18 Black men and one Black boy killed in encounters with police, accounting for 36.5% of all police fatalities, despite the Black population constituting only 8.3% of the city's population (Dunn, 2018). Particularly concerning is the vulnerability of Black male youth to these deadly encounters. Studies have shown a direct correlation between police brutality and poor mental health days among individuals from Black communities (Cénat, 2022), placing Black male youths at a significant disadvantage in terms of mental health.

Extracurricular programs offer a valuable opportunity for implementing prevention and early intervention strategies. Often based in schools or community centers, these programs cater specifically to the needs of youth in underserved communities and address challenges in accessing mental health services. The Life Education Program of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), is an example of a culturally responsive mental health initiative designed to destigmatize mental health issues by providing Black students with relatable mentors and safe spaces for open mental health discussions. This report will explore the positive impacts and advantages of the Life Education Program, particularly for Black boys, in providing culturally sensitive mental health services.

Life Education Program Context and Background

The Life Education Program is a well-being initiative that has been adapted by the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement ("Centre of Excellence" or "the

Centre”)¹ under the leadership and guidance of Social Workers Ryan Fuentes and Shand Licorish (the two Centre of Excellence system social workers). The program aims to create culturally relevant healing spaces for Black² boys in High Schools. The goals of the Life Education Program align with the mandate of the Centre, which is to identify, develop and facilitate culturally responsive and relevant healing practices for groups of students (Centre of Excellence, 2021); the TDSB’s multi-year strategic plan: Build partnerships and relationships within school communities to support student learning and well-being, and create a culture for students and staff well-being (2019); and the TDSB’s Anti-Hate and Anti-Racism Strategy (2019).

The program offers social-emotional support through group counselling, enabling them to acquire mental health literacy, social-emotional learning, and advocacy skills. These skills empower them to address issues such as anti-Black racism, mental health stigma, and racial trauma in education. The purpose of the program is to provide students with culturally relevant and responsive mentorship spaces that help to identify and facilitate Black-affirming healing practices and strategies to address stigma, anti-Black racism and racial trauma caused by diverse systems like education. The program adopts a preventative, strength-based approach, covering four central topics—academic achievement, mentorship, emotional intelligence, and mental health—to tackle the impact of anti-Black racism on mental health.

The program was established in 2011, addressing long standing community issues such as gang involvement, gun violence, drug addiction and trauma-related disorders, particularly affecting Black boys. The Life Education Program created a sense of belonging through its community tutoring program by using sports as a method of teaching life skills and teamwork skills. This program created a space of love, mentorship, unity, and beauty, encouraging students to strive for Black excellence and academic success (R. Fuentes, personal communication, October, Thursday, 2023).

¹ [Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement](#)

² The term Black refers to individuals, peoples or communities of Black /African descent living in Canada. This may include, but are not limited to individuals or peoples from the Black diaspora with varying geographical, historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, and ancestral origins and influences (e.g. African, African-Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, Afro Latin, Afro indigenous, Afro-Europeans).

Figure 1

Ryan Fuentes (Social Worker, far left), Kai Gordon (Graduation Coach for Black Students, far right, top), Simone Martin (Teacher, far right, bottom) and students from Westview Centennial Secondary School with their Life Education Certificates



Note. Youth posing with their Life Education Program participation certificates. From “The Life Education Program at Westview Centennial Secondary School,” by R. Fuentes, 2022. Copyright 2022 by R. Fuentes. Reprinted with permission.

Furthermore, Ryan highlighted that his personal journey as a Black male in Rexdale, coupled with witnessing the compounded challenges faced by his peers through the intersections of the educational and criminal justice systems, significantly influenced the program's development. The community of Rexdale is characterized by stigmas related to gangs, drugs, law enforcement, and high dropout rates among Black

boys, which was the catalyst for the program's inception. As a community program, it served as a safe haven for Black boys who faced stereotyping, discrimination, and pathologization within the education system. Since its inception, the program has focused on providing Black boys in the Rexdale community a safe space and ongoing support throughout their educational and life journeys. Beyond addressing academic concerns and graduation rates, the program aimed at fostering a sense of belonging, challenging marginalized perspectives shaped by school policies such as the zero-tolerance policy.

Life Education Program Impacts

The program was piloted at AY Jackson Secondary School and further developed into a bridging program/mentorship model, exemplified by its implementation at Shoreham Public School and Westview Centennial Secondary School in 2022. Using an overarching bridging/mentorship framework, the program focused on cultivating pathways to well-being and academic success. In its first implementation, 16 Black boys in grades 3 to 5 at Shoreham Public School and 20 Black boys in grades 9 and 10 at Westview Secondary School actively engaged in the program.

The program incorporated practical strategies for participants to advocate for their well-being within schools. This included professional learning opportunities for staff, co-developed and co-facilitated with social workers and youth within the program. Weekly sessions featured play therapy activities, resource sharing on accessing appropriate Black mental health support, and workshops to enhance mental health literacy.

Data Collection and Analysis

The artifacts that form part of this analysis were collected from a video presentation of the Life Education Program at Westview Centennial Secondary School (WCSS) and survey data from student participants of the program at AY Jackson Secondary School (AYJSS) and Shoreham Public School (SPS). The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based on survey data

responses of 11 students of AY Jackson Secondary School and 10 students of Shoreham Public School who participated in the program as well as the video presentation of the program at Westview Centennial Secondary School. The themes were identified using inductive deductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following represents the demographics of the participants who took part in the survey:

A. Y. Jackson Secondary School: Eleven participants across grades 9 to grade 12 took part in the survey. Approximately one-third of the participants were in grade 9, approximately one-quarter were in grade 10, and participants were evenly distributed across grades 11 and 12. Eight of the participants identified as either Black or Afro-Caribbean, while 2 identified as African and 1 as Caucasian. All the participants identified themselves as male.

Shoreham Public School: No demographic data was collected. However, feedback in the form of a survey was collected from 10 participants of the Life Education Program. Feedback included both written and visual data in the form of drawings in response to questions. The survey consisted of three questions that asked students to reflect on how the program helped them develop coping skills and a sense of belonging.

Westview Centennial Secondary School: No demographic data was collected.

Figure 2.

A. Y. Jackson Secondary School Students in Life Education Program



Note. Students from A. Y. Jackson filling out a post-survey in a classroom. From “The Life Education Program at A. Y. Jackson,” by R. Fuentes, December 9 2022. Copyright 2022 by R. Fuentes. Reprinted with permission.

Findings

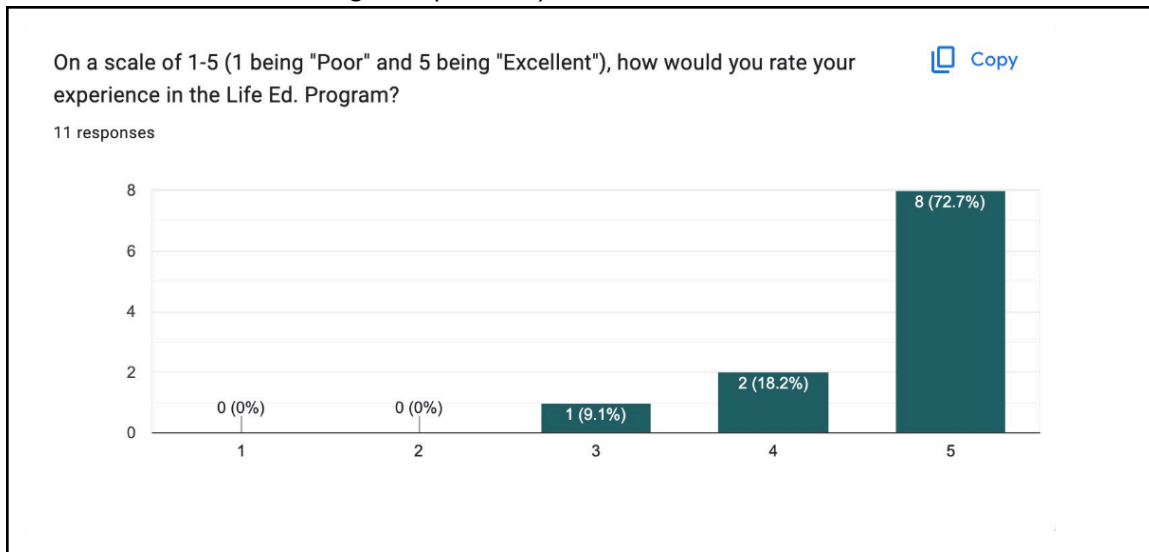
Across the surveys from the students at AYJSS and SPS and the video story about the program at WCSS, students articulated a diverse range of takeaways from the program, including an enhanced sense of belonging, heightened awareness of anti-Black racism, and the program’s positive impact on their emotional and mental well-being.

Sense of Belonging

Students at AYJSS reported a heightened sense of belonging within the school community owing to their participation in Life Education. The data showed that the Life Education Program was a very successful initiative. The majority of student respondents at AYJSS (90%) rated their engagement with the program as either great or excellent. Figure 2 presents information regarding students' satisfaction with the Life Education Program. The Fante-Coleman and Jackson-Best (2020) review also identified that positive relationships with healthcare providers have been recognized as key facilitators.

Figure 3

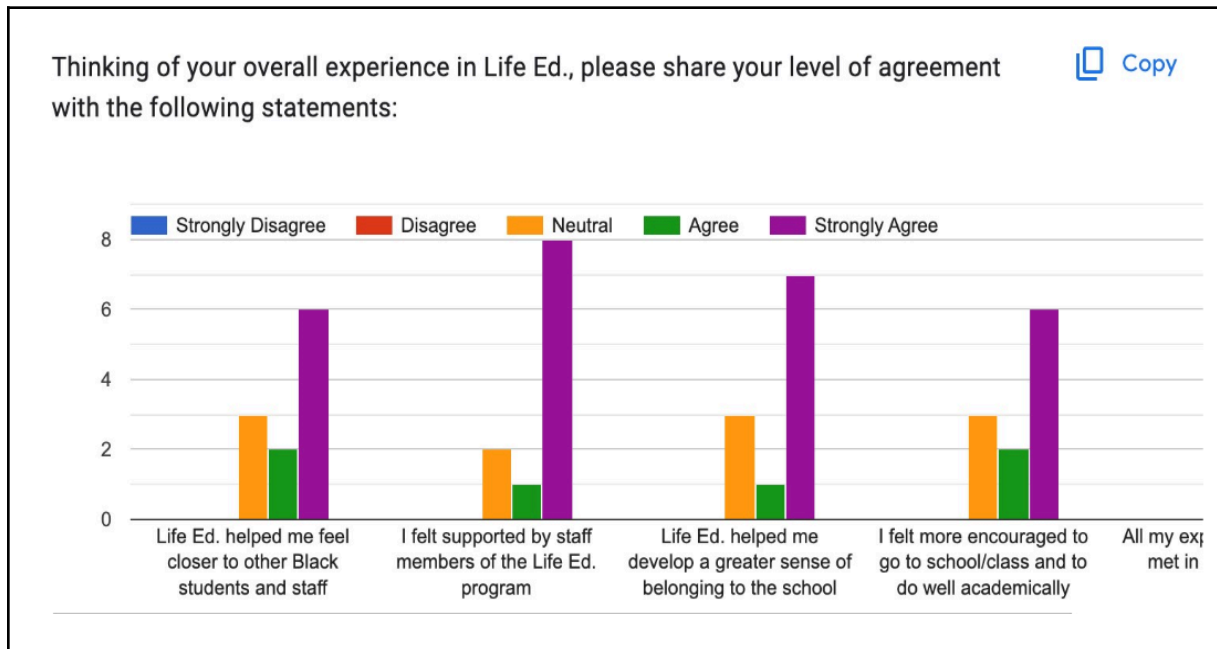
Satisfaction with the Program (AYJSS)



Furthermore, Figure 4 shows that over 80% of student participants expressed feeling supported by the staff members of the Life Education program.

Figure 4

The overall experience in the Life Education Program



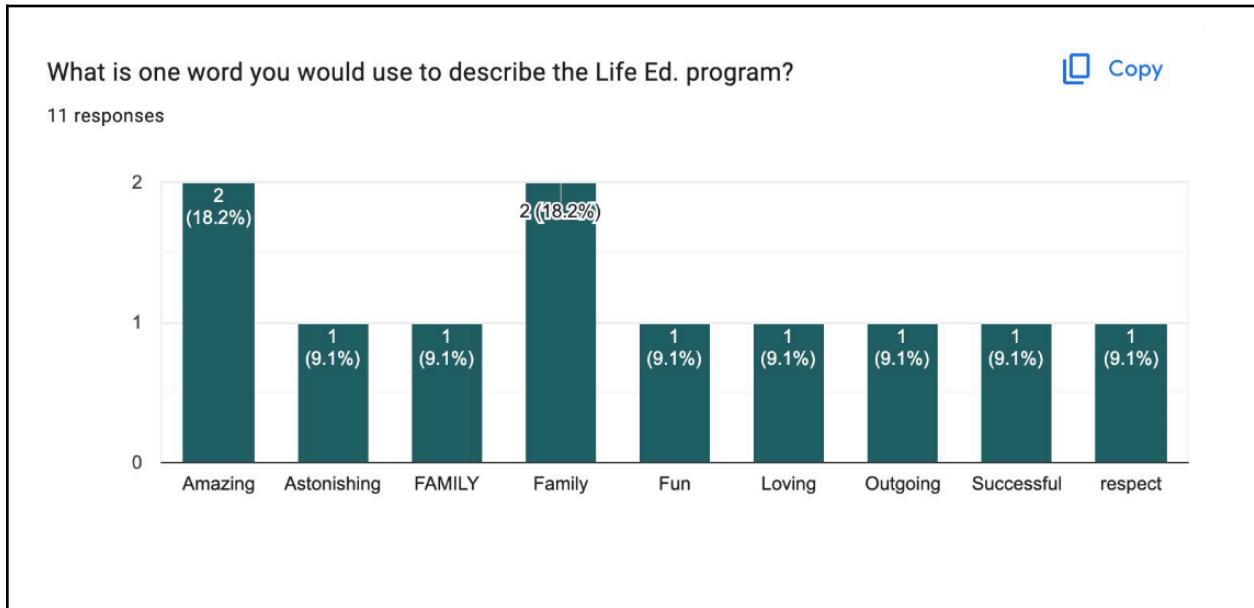
This sense of belonging fostered by the program is further evident in the statements made by the participating students. One AYJSS student described the program “as a space where they could be themselves.” The collective accountability and shared experiences of the program created a tight-knit community, fostering a sense of responsibility among its members. One participant shared, “Before the program, I felt that I didn’t really fit in. But after the program and being with everyone else, it helped me find a place where I belong.” The program’s role in fostering a sense of belonging is seen in this testimony and others provided by participating students. Another student characterized it as a space where they could authentically express themselves. The collective responsibility and shared experiences forged a closely-knit community, instilling a sense of duty and care among its members. This sentiment is reflected in the words of a student who expressed, “This program made me feel like I belong to something bigger—a community that understands me. We’re not just friends; we’re family, and that sense of belonging fuels our positivity towards school and life.”

The concept of a sense of belonging was further underscored when the student participants of AYJSS overwhelmingly acknowledged the program’s pivotal role in

fostering a sense of understanding and providing a secure space for participants. The recurring use of the terms 'family' and 'amazing' in their descriptions highlighted the program's ability to create an atmosphere that evoked feelings of being at home.

Figure 5

Overall Experience: Participants Share One Word to Capture the Essence of the Life Education Program



Increased Awareness of Anti-Black Racism

Another theme that emerged from the data is the role of the Life Education Program in raising awareness among students at the WCSS about the pervasive issue of anti-Black racism, both within their schools and society at large.

Figure 6

Students from Westview Centennial Secondary School in Life Education Program



Note. Students seated in a healing circle at a gymnasium basketball court listening to Ryan Fuentes. From “The Life Education Program at Westview Centennial Secondary School,” by R. Fuentes, May 11, 2023. Copyright 2023 by Name of R. Fuentes. Reprinted with permission.

The incorporation of culturally relevant and responsive mentorship spaces allowed participants to critically engage with and understand the challenges faced by Black individuals, shedding light on the deep-rooted challenges faced by Black individuals. As expressed by one student participant, "The program doesn't just tell us about racism; it lets us feel it, process it, and challenge it together" (WCSS, video presentation). The participants acknowledged that the program helped them understand that they are not alone in facing unfair treatment due to their race.

Emotional Intelligence and Mental Health Literacy

A final notable outcome of The Life Education Program was its ability to transform the emotional intelligence among program participants.

Figure 7 revealed that a substantial number of participants acknowledged the program's role in enhancing their emotional intelligence and mental health literacy. An overwhelming majority of student respondents (90%) expressed satisfaction with the effectiveness of the Life Education program in fostering improvements in their mental health and well-being. The program's workshops on mental health literacy equipped students with practical tools to navigate complex emotions. The program was directly credited with enhancing the mental health of many participants, providing support through various means such as coping mechanisms, emotional support, and tools for navigating challenges.

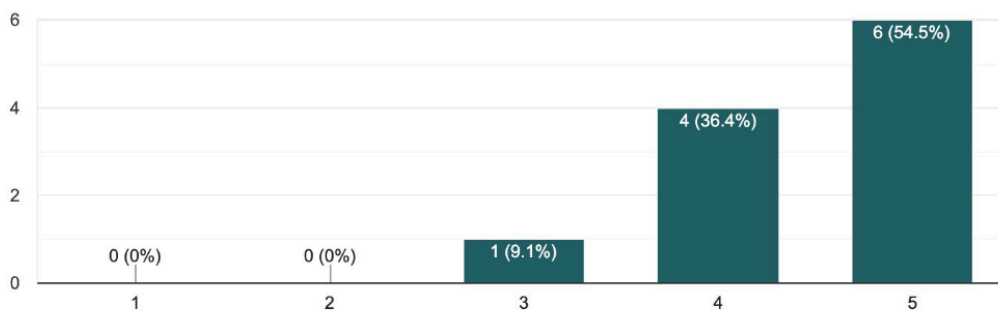
Figure 7

Emotional Intelligence and Mental Health

On a scale of 1-5 (1 being "Not very well" and 5 being "Extremely well"), how well did the Life Education program provided support to improve your mental health and wellbeing ?

 Copy

11 responses



The impact on their emotional intelligence was evident from students' ability to engage in open and vulnerable conversations since starting the program. Students identified a range of behaviours in the domain of emotional intelligence, from being able

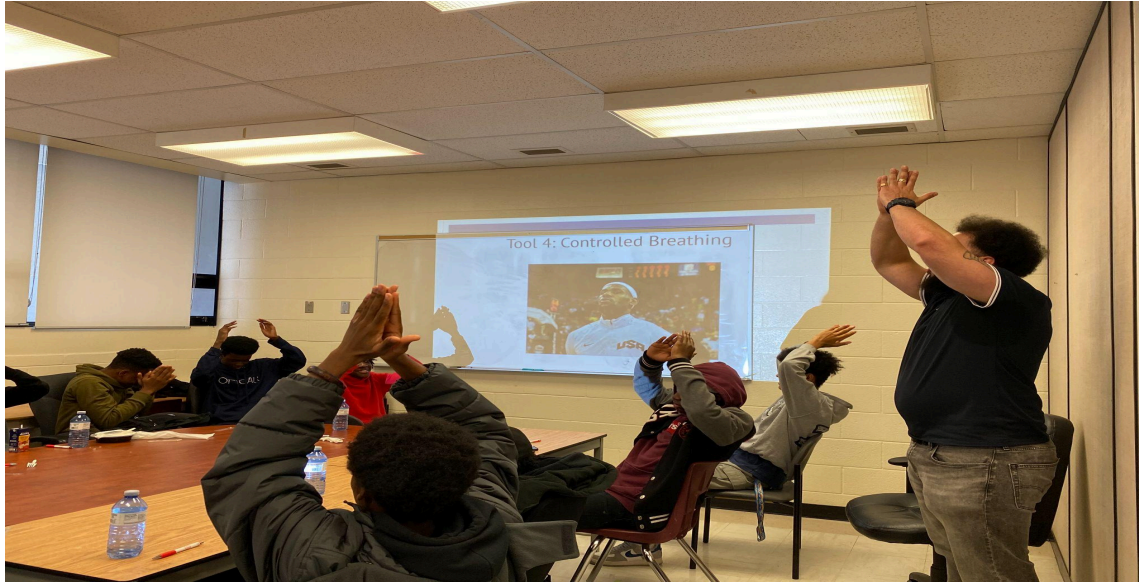
to openly discuss their feelings to seeking support for conflict mediation. As one participant shared, "I've learned to navigate my emotions better and help others do the same. We've become a support system for each other, and that's a powerful form of emotional intelligence" (AYJSS, post-survey). Responses from the middle school students at SPS also highlighted the diverse ways in which the program has positively influenced mental health and well-being. They identified the importance of respecting others and looking out for each other. One participant shared, "I learned how to respect others and to make good choices" (SPS, post-survey).

Personalized Coping Strategies

Under the theme of emotional intelligence and mental health, the subtheme of coping strategies was prominent in the data set. The data suggests that the Life Education Program empowered students and equipped them with a personalized coping strategies toolkit. Insights from participants revealed the impacts of these strategies on both their academic performance and mental well-being. One SPS student's reflection encapsulated this impact: "The program taught me that self-care isn't just a buzzword. It's about making choices that help me thrive academically and personally. I've seen my grades go up, and I credit it to the coping strategies I've learned here." Students from AYJSS also reported on the variety of personal coping strategies attributed to participating in the program.

Figure 8

A. Y. Jackson Secondary School Students Practicing Coping Strategies in Life Education Program.



Note. Students practicing controlled breathing as part of learning about coping strategies. From “The Life Education Program at A. Y. Jackson,” by R. Fuentes, March 20, 2023. Copyright 2023 by R. Fuentes. Reprinted with permission.

Students mentioned that the program taught them practical techniques to cope with negative emotions, such as breathing exercises, music therapy, and counting to ten. This is consistent with the program's aim of offering resources and strategies for students to deal with stress, conflicts, and challenges in ways that suit their personal needs.

Recommendations

Moving forward, scaling efforts for the initiative involves expanding the program into each learning center of the TDSB at identified feeder schools and working collaboratively with the Centre's graduation coaches and Black Student Success and

Excellence schools to ensure a comprehensive and impactful approach. The following recommendations emerged from the findings:

Scaling: Consider scaling the Life Education Program to reach a wider student population, acknowledging its positive impact on sense of belonging, awareness of racism, emotional intelligence, and mental health literacy.

Integration into School Curriculum: Explore opportunities to integrate elements of the Life Education Program into the school curriculum to ensure that all students have access to its benefits. Collaboration with other school initiatives and subjects can enhance the program's impact and make it an integral part of the overall educational experience.

Community Engagement: Encourage community engagement by involving parents, guardians, and community members in aspects of the Life Education Program. Foster a sense of community beyond the school walls by organizing events, workshops, or forums involving the larger community in discussions related to sense of belonging, racism, and mental health.

Professional Development for Educators: Provide professional development opportunities for educators involved in the Life Education Program to enhance their skills in addressing sensitive topics, fostering inclusivity, and supporting students' emotional and mental well-being.

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