

[Reflection]

How Black youth see themselves matters for their Education

This reflection is part of a series Laidlaw Foundation is publishing for Black History Month. The series will highlight the issues we prioritize (education, child welfare, criminal justice, and environmental justice) while also showcasing the critical discussions, leadership and initiatives of Black communities in Ontario within these contexts.

I recently attended the *2nd Annual Black Education Symposium* hosted by the Centre for Black Studies in Education at OISE. While the symposium focused on affirming Blackness in academia, the conversations spoke directly to the broader education system and, in particular, to the realities Black scholars and youth face within it. As someone who works for an organization that primarily funds grassroots initiatives and advocates for Black youth who are underserved by schools, the event reinforced a powerful truth that shapes our work every day at Laidlaw Foundation: **how Black youth see themselves matters more than how systems or others choose to perceive them.**

Across the Symposium's panels, speakers emphasized the importance of centering Blackness in education. Black Canadian histories and experiences are often absent from curricula or filtered through Eurocentric and borrowed frameworks (*e.g.* from the United States). This absence sends a powerful message to Black youth, not only about whose knowledge is valued, but about who they are allowed to be. When young people are consistently positioned outside the center, their sense of belonging, confidence, and possibility is undermined. They spoke about using Black Canadian history, and Black ways of knowing to reimagine the education system. However, the symposium made clear that affirming Black education requires the intentional practice of strengthening Black youth identity and sense of self. Systemic barriers, stereotypes, and imposed narratives will continue to exist in the education system, but they do not have to define Black youths academic or livelihood outcomes. When Black youth are grounded in their histories, cultures, and lived experiences, they are better equipped to resist deficit narratives and assert their own understanding of who they are. Supporting grassroots groups that center identity affirmation, through mentorship, storytelling, creative expression, and community, consistently create the conditions for young people to thrive, even within systems that remain inequitable.

It is important to challenge the "deficit lens" that frames Black youth as 'at risk', disengaged, or incapable. Panelists talked about unlearning dominant "epistemologies" that privilege eurocentric ways of knowing, particularly in research and education that value approaches rooted in "detached objectivity", exemplified by an emphasis on standardized metrics and written peer reviewed work, over methods rooted in storytelling, art, and lived experiences. These latter approaches position Black communities as knowledge holders rather than problems to be solved. This perspective aligns closely with Laidlaw's youth-focused and youth-led work, where young people are not just participants in programs, but leaders shaping the spaces meant to support them. When Black youth are given a voice and agency, their leadership becomes a powerful force for change within and beyond the education system.

The panelists further stressed on the important role imagination and self-definition play in a future where Black youth can thrive. They called it “Freedom dreaming” and it was described as envisioning futures beyond imposed limitations, rooted in ancestral knowledge and collective care. For Black youth, this means having the space to imagine themselves as scholars, creators, and leaders on their own terms. While external perceptions often limit what Black youth are expected to achieve, a strong sense of self can expand what they believe is possible. The panelists were representative of this possibility. Three panels lined with Black Educators, Scholars, Administrators, Researchers, and Advocates who despite the systemic barriers achieved success in life and are striving to pave the way for future generations. They spoke of the challenges they faced in their journeys and how oftentimes they had to create spaces for themselves where none existed before. Several phrases repeated throughout the symposium stayed with me, including *“If you are not at the table, you are on the menu”* and *“Center your positionality or it will be positioned for you.”* For organizations that fund and advocate for Black youth, these words are reminders of responsibility. Supporting Black education means centering youth voices, trusting youth leadership, and investing in spaces that affirm identity rather than policing it. Ultimately, affirming Black education is not about correcting Black youth. Instead, it is about ensuring they have the confidence, voice, and sense of self to navigate and challenge systems that were never built with them in mind. When Black youth are supported to define themselves and lead, their futures are no longer confined by imposed perceptions, but shaped by their own vision and power.

Haiat Iman

Research, Learning, and Evaluation Lead