

**FROM THE VILLAGE TO  
THE VISION**

# **2025 BSSSLP MAGAZINE**



**VOICES OF  
TRANSFORMATION  
EDITION 3**

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# WHY WE LEAD WITH YOUTH VOICE

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By **Tanitiã Munroe**, Senior Research Coordinator

At the heart of the Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) is a conviction: Black youth are not simply leaders of tomorrow—they are leaders of today. Over the past six years, BSSLP has become a model for Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), a framework that empowers students to investigate issues that matter to them, uncover root causes, and propose solutions grounded in lived experience, cultural knowledge, and community care.

Rooted in Afrocentric research traditions, BSSLP's YPAR approach draws on principles such as **Ubuntu**—"I am because you are"—which affirms that our humanity is bound together through connection, community, and care. Here, students are not only taught how to do research—they are taught to do it differently: with care, with purpose, and with the understanding that research is a tool for liberation.



**Photo caption:** Junior Leaders engage in discussion at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium.



**Photo caption:** Junior Leaders Natalia Jackson and Bridget Aremu present their research at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium.

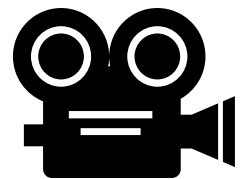
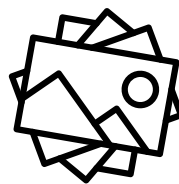
As **Molefi Kete Asante** reminds us, "Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate." In our program, this means Black youth are centered not just as subjects of research, but as theorists, analysts, and architects of knowledge. From literature reviews that prioritize Black authors to storytelling that honors lived experience as valid data, students engage in research that is rigorous, relevant, and radically affirming.



Afrocentric scholar Ama Mazama expands on this imperative: “Afrocentric research seeks not only to study the African world, but to do so from an African-centered standpoint, thereby challenging the hegemonic production of knowledge that has historically excluded African people.”

Every summer, this commitment comes alive as Junior Leaders join one of five creative research Pods, each offering a distinct way of knowing:

- **Creative Arts & Musicology** – visual art, music, spoken word, poetry, and performance bring research to life
- **Storytelling** – narrative, poetry, and oral history center personal and community voices
- **Photovoice** – photography documents and interprets everyday realities
- **Podcasting** – interviews and audio stories explore personal and collective experiences
- **Video Essays** – film and editing create compelling multimedia arguments



For returning Junior Leaders, the **Action Research** Pod deepens the journey, transforming previous findings into pilot projects, policy recommendations, and real-world interventions—turning research into leadership.

With guidance from the all-Black/African research team at the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement, students move through the full research cycle—from inquiry to analysis to public presentation—while building scholarly confidence and a deep sense of community responsibility.

In this third edition of *Voices of Transformation*, you will hear directly from youth researchers about their topics, their evolving perspectives, and their visions for the future. You will also meet the educators, research associates, and community mentors who walk alongside them, creating space for radical imagination, critical dialogue, and bold advocacy.

**Because when youth voice is rooted in Afrocentric ways of knowing, we are not just making space—we are building a legacy.**



# #BSSLPINACTION: CAPTURING THE JOURNEY THROUGH PHOTOS



**Photo caption:** Madiba Kaggwa presenting his research at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium



**Photo caption:** Dr. Cynthia Kwakyewah and Dr. Cyril Cromwell posing for the camera at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium



**Photo caption:** Hadiya Mohamed smiles with her father at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium



**Photo caption:** TDSB Director of Education Clayton LaTouche and the Peer Mentors and Peer Mentor Lead Meron Bayu



**Photo caption:** Gladys Ola-David & Kuo Diangha present their research at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium



**Photo caption:** Neriah Barrett and Lujane Abdelaziz presenting their research at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium.

# GROUNDING OUR WORK IN YPAR

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By **Sophia Barnett**, Peer Mentor

## What is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR?)

For over six years, the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement's Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) has empowered Black youth annually to design and present Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) projects—research driven by the issues that matter most to them. Through YPAR, students investigate topics tied to social justice in the Black community, centering their own voices as catalysts for change in systems like education.

*"I've played group sports my whole life... in lower-income communities, we haven't had the opportunity to get the development that we might have needed."* — **Myles Dyson-Duah**, Recent Graduate, Northern Secondary School

Junior Leaders move through the entire research process—from spring drafts to summer data collection and analysis—culminating in public presentations where families, community members and educators hear their recommendations. Many of these proposals are shared with different departments across the TDSB, turning student research into real-world change.

## Afrocentrism in Research: The Critical Race Approach

Afrocentricity means centering Black voices, knowledge, and cultural traditions in research. Junior Leaders are encouraged to draw on Black scholarship, lived experiences, and community wisdom to uplift the Black/African diaspora through their work.

"I enjoy learning how to properly research, and finding Black authors to highlight what they contribute to the community and what they contribute to my topic so I can learn more from that and better my understanding of the whole topic I choose." - **Ayube Abdurahman**, Grade 12 Student, Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute



**Photo Caption:** Uhunoma Diamond Okoro-Obaraye reflecting on the importance of keeping Black voices at the center of the research narrative.

*"I think it's made me think in a more Afrocentric approach. Usually, I understand that Black people are erased from the narrative a lot, and our history is not taught in schools, which is a problem in its own. But I think being here and being surrounded by other Black people, especially Black researchers, have taught us that we need to center ourselves, we need to keep ourselves in the narrative, because if we don't speak about ourselves, no one else will. And even if they do, they will portray us in a negative light."* - **Uhunoma Diamond Okoro-Obaraye**, Grade 12 Student, Georges Vanier Secondary School

## Ubuntu and Ethical Praxis in Black Youth-Led Inquiry

**Ubuntu**—"I am because you are"—is a guiding principle in the BSSLP. It affirms that our humanity is bound together, and that growth comes from uplifting one another.

BSSLP is more than a program—it is a home where Black students find connection, belonging, and shared purpose. Graduates often return to mentor new Junior Leaders, continuing the cycle of community care and knowledge-sharing.



**Photo Caption:** Hamdi Mahamud sharing how connecting with peers from different backgrounds has expanded her perspective.

*"Meeting new people from different places and talking to them about their research broadens how I understand what people are going through and the things they're interested in."* — **Hamdi Mahamud**, Grade 12 Student, Thistletown Collegiate Institute



## Avoiding Bias and Upholding Ethics

Junior Leaders are trained to uphold ethical standards, ensure participants' rights are respected, and approach data without bias. They learn to consider multiple perspectives, grounding their work in evidence rather than assumptions.

## From Spring to Summer to Action

While first-year Junior Leaders focus on research and presentations, returning Junior Leaders develop action plans to implement their findings—transforming research into tangible change.

*"My topic reflects both my own experiences and those I've seen in my community... It fuels my passion for the research."* — **Liyah Simm-Smith**, Grade 12 Student, Ursula Franklin Academy

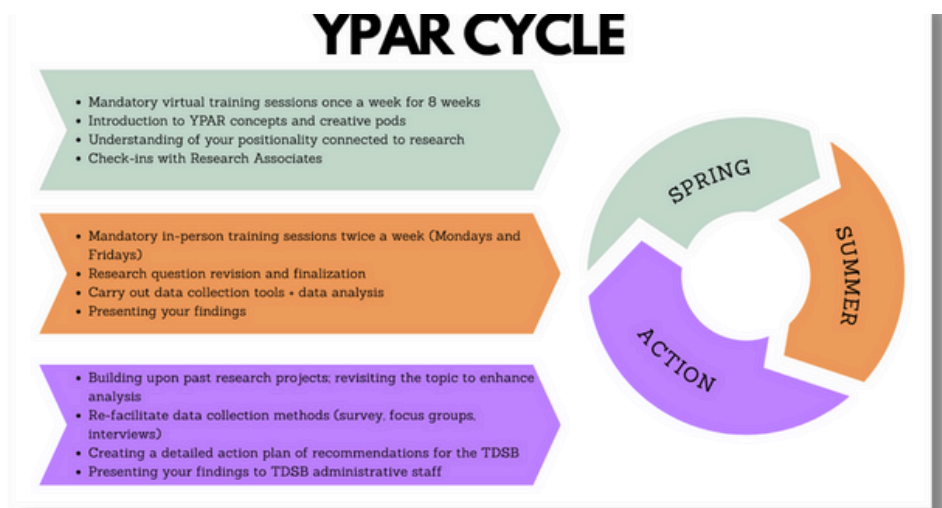
*"Anti-Black racism in schools is both a personal wound and a systemic policy problem."* — **Ebla Sulaiman**, Recent Graduate, SATEC @ W. A. Porter Collegiate Institute



**Photo Caption:** Ebla Sulaiman reflects how Anti-Black racism deeply impacts Black students both personally and systematically.



**Photo Caption:** Liyah Simm-Smith shares how her research project reflects the lived experiences of herself and the community.



**Photo Caption:** YPAR Cycle Chart — Mapping the journey from inquiry to action, and the ways research evolves over time.

# INSIDE THE PODS: CREATIVE METHODOLOGIES IN ACTION AND THOSE WHO RUN THEM

By **Akaiah Carter-Sam**, Peer Mentor



**Photo Caption:** From **top left to right:** Cecil Chikezie, Dr. Cynthia Kwakyewah, Willis Opondo, Nordiah Newell, Dr. Annette Walker, Dr. Cyril Cromwell. From **bottom left to right:** Jordyn Van Vliet, Ransford Dugba Tei, Desiree Sylvestre, Avery McIntosh, and Fisseha Gebremedhin. **Not Pictured:** Sheldon Dixon, Dr. Shawnee Hardware

At the end of the Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP), Junior Leaders present their research through an Afrocentric lens, centering the experiences of African peoples and the diaspora. Throughout the summer, they work in five creative research streams—known as **Pods**—each guided by experienced leaders who help students transform their findings into culturally grounded, powerful expressions.

## Creative Arts and Musicology

Blending creativity with scholarship, the Creative Arts & Musicology stream invites Junior Leaders to showcase their research through artistic, oral, or signed expression. Led by Research Associates **Dr. Cynthia Kwakyewah**, **Dr. Cyril Cromwell**, **Sheldon Dixon**, and Research Intern **Avery McIntosh**, this space embraces multiple forms of artistry—including visual art, spoken word, poetry, and music—as powerful tools for knowledge sharing.

**Dr. Kwakyewah**, a Course Director at York University and Research Associate with the TDSB, earned her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Oxford. **Dr. Cromwell**, a Research Fellow with YouthREX, recently defended his doctoral dissertation at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). **Dixon**, a TDSB Graduation Coach for Black students, supports academic success, leadership development, and well-being, and holds a Master's in Religious Education and Counseling. He also brings his skills as the program's resident DJ, infusing the space with rhythm and energy. **McIntosh**, a third-year Biology student specializing in Zoology at Laurentian University, contributes as a TDSB Research Intern.



**Photo Caption:** Bridget Aremu smiles for the camera during the 2025 BSSLP Research Symposium.

For Junior Leader Bridget Aremu, a Grade 11 student from Sir Wilfrid Laurier Collegiate Institute, the value of this approach lies in its inclusivity: *"It showcases art in different ways—you don't have to be good at drawing or painting...it's also a safe space where we can present our works."*

## Photovoice – Telling Stories Through the Lens



**Photo caption:** Avaia Hardy smiles while sharing her research approach, describing it as both creative and deeply personal.

**Photovoice** transforms photography into a powerful research tool, enabling Junior Leaders to capture stories, perspectives, and lived experiences in ways that words alone cannot. Guided by **Willis Opondo**, a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Social Justice Education at the University of Toronto and a Research Associate with the TDSB, students learn how images can convey meaning, evoke emotion, and present data in visually compelling ways.

**Opondo's** research focuses on Indigenous knowledge and governance, decolonization, youth engagement in decision-making, and equity in education—values that resonate deeply in the work students produce.

For **Avaia Hardy**, a recent graduate of York Mills Collegiate Institute, this approach is both creative and personal: "I find Photovoice enjoyable as it shows how pictures can demonstrate a story...it captures my perception of things."



## Storytelling – Honouring Oral Traditions

Drawing on the rich oral traditions of African and Indigenous cultures, the Storytelling stream invites Junior Leaders to share their research in ways that honour history, heritage, and lived experience. Led by **Ransford Dugba Tei** and **Jordyn Van Vliet**, this approach empowers students to craft narratives that reflect both personal meaning and cultural depth.

**Tei**, a Graduate Research Fellow with the Harriet Tubman Institute, serves as a Research and Teaching Assistant at York University and a Research Associate with the TDSB. He is currently completing his Ph.D. in History at York University. **Van Vliet**, a TDSB Research Intern, is a second-year Political Science and History student at Queen's University.

For **Sienna De Simone**, a Grade 12 student at Forest Hill Collegiate Institute, the process is as liberating as it is meaningful: “It allows for a lot of creativity and interpretation in your own way...showcasing however it means to you and your culture.”



**Photo caption:** Sienna De Simone enthusiastically shares her thoughts on the research process and its potential to be liberating.

## Podcast – Conversations that Spark Change

The podcast format offers Junior Leaders a relaxed yet impactful way to share their research—encouraging open conversations, personal reflection, and dynamic data analysis. Guided by **Cecil Chikezie** and **Desiree Sylvestre**, this stream allows students to connect with audiences in an accessible and engaging style that differs from traditional interviews.

**Chikezie**, a TDSB Research Associate, is also a Human Factors Researcher and a second-year graduate student in Biomedical Engineering at the University of Toronto.



**Photo Caption:** Olamidé Idowutaylor shares his thoughts on the power of podcasting as a platform for presenting research findings.

**Sylvestre**, Senior Manager at Visions of Science, leads a team of educators committed to advancing STEM education, while also serving as a TDSB Research Associate. She is currently completing her doctoral studies at OISE in Educational Leadership and Policy.

For **Olamidé Idowutaylor**, a Grade 12 student from Thistleton Collegiate Institute, affirms that podcasting is both an empowering and practical tool: *“Being able to bring awareness and positive change through my podcast is an amazing thing...I also like that it's a convenient tool.”*



## Video Essay – Research as Visual Storytelling

The video essay format blends narrative, imagery, and sound to create research presentations that are both visually engaging and intellectually rich. Similar to a documentary, it allows Junior Leaders to maintain full narrative and aesthetic control, whether through video diaries, ethnographic footage, or other multimedia approaches.

This stream is guided by **Fisseha Gebremedhin** and **Dr. Annette Walker**.

**Gebremedhin**, a TDSB Research Coordinator, earned his Master's in Applied Mathematics from Mekelle University and is currently a Ph.D. student in Mathematics Education at Queen's University, focusing on access, equity, social justice, and fostering a positive mathematics identity. **Dr. Walker**, also a TDSB Research Coordinator, holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Western University with a specialization in critical policy, equity, and leadership studies.

For **Kasmina Providence**, a Grade 11 student from Stephen Leacock Collegiate Institute, the appeal lies in the format's clarity and accessibility: *"I like how video essays are easy-to-consume content—it's short, concise, and informative...it's also good when having a supportive Pod Leader."*



**Photo Caption:** Kasmina Providence smiles as she discusses the accessibility of video essays while preparing for the 2025 BSSLP Research Symposium.

## Action Research

Action Research provides a space for returning Junior Leaders to build on the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) projects they began last year, transforming their findings into concrete action plans aligned with the TDSB's Multi-Year Strategic Plan (MYSP). This stream is led by **Nordiah Newell** and **Dr. Shawnee Hardware**, who guide students in bridging research and real-world change.

**Newell**, a TDSB Research Associate, holds an Honours Specialization in Political Science and French Studies and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at York University, focusing on disinformation and civic engagement. **Dr. Hardware**, a Professor and Coordinator at George Brown College as well as a TDSB Research Associate, earned her Ph.D. in Language, Culture, and Teaching from York University and her M.Ed. in Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning Studies from Memorial University of Newfoundland.

For returning Junior Leader **Tiasia Robinson**, a recent graduate from Westview Centennial Secondary School, states the experience is both meaningful and empowering: "Being in action research allows me to expand on my previous research that was meaningful to me, with the opportunity of using my creativity in the process... I feel a sense of accomplishment because I am better able to invoke change."



**Photo Caption:** Tiasia Robinson reflects on her journey as a returning Junior Leader, now putting her research into action.



The Black Student Summer Leadership Program is more than a showcase of research—it is a celebration of voice, vision, and the boundless creativity of our Junior Leaders. Guided by their Pod Leaders, these young scholars have transformed ideas into works of art, narrative, and action that honour Afrocentric perspectives and lived experience. As the summer draws to a close, we welcome community members to the YPAR Symposium at the end of August to witness not only the final projects, but the power, pride, and possibility that emerge when young people are given the space to lead, create, and inspire change.



**Photo Caption:** Desiree Sylvestre works with Junior Leaders in the Podcast Pod.



**Photo Caption:** A Junior Leader proudly wears a Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement shirt featuring the bell hooks quote: 'Belonging is a core longing of the soul.'

# POD PROFILES: OUR RESEARCH, OUR VOICE

By **Sachiel Andre**, Peer Mentor

## Podcast

### Projects of Passion - Junior Leaders Research Topics:

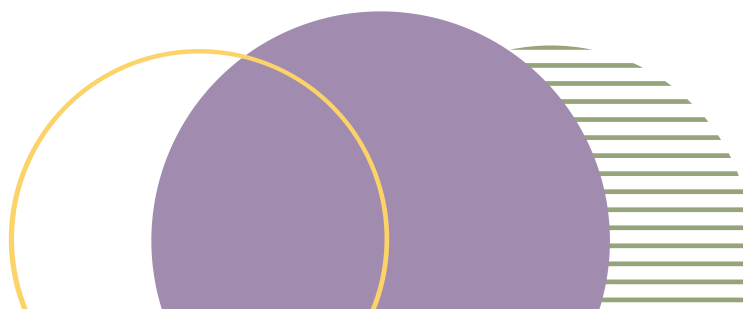
*"Our topic is the impact of community members on the post-secondary achievement of Black students—how people such as family and mentors influence the careers and pathways of Black students."* — **Ararat Berhe**, Grade 11 Student, Birchmount Park Collegiate Institute



**Photo Caption:** From left to right — Elyse Fisher-Uriarte, Ararat Berhe, and Anjola Adewole, sharing how podcasting creates space for open, authentic dialogue in research.

## Why Podcast?

*"I like podcasts because it's a good way to explain topics to people—you're talking, and I prefer talking to drawing or traditional presenting. When you talk, it feels like a conversation with a friend, and I can express my ideas more naturally."* — **Anjola Adewole**, Recent Graduate, Newtonbrook Secondary School





**Photo Caption:** From left to right — Madiba Kaggwa, Malcolm-Taiwo Mayers, Noa Burke-Smith, and Sundus Mohamed, using art to translate research into powerful visual narratives.

## Creative Arts and Musicology

*"I love to create, so anything artsy—that's probably my area."* — **Noa Burke-Smith**, Grade 12 Student, Richview Collegiate Institute

### Projects of Passion — Junior Leaders' Research Topics:

*"My topic is about understanding the negative perceptions of natural hair for Black female high school students. I struggled with self-perception and my natural hair, so I wanted to find a solution—and visual arts felt like the best way to represent it."* — **Noa Burke-Smith**, Grade 12 Student, Richview Collegiate Institute

## "Why Choose Creative Arts and Musicology?"

*"This pod gives you the creative freedom to make whatever represents your work best. My research is about mental health stigmatization, and creating an art piece allows me to portray the struggles Black youth face with authenticity."* — **Sundus Mohamed**, Grade 12 Student, Cedarbrae Collegiate Institute

## Video Essay

*"I like making videos, and I've done something like this before, so it came naturally to me."* —

**Raheem Acheampong**,  
Recent Graduate, Forest  
Hill Collegiate Institute



**Photo Caption:** From left to right — Raheem Acheampong, Hadiya Mohamed, and Micah-Kehende Mayers, blending film, storytelling, and research in digital form.



## Projects of Passion — Junior Leaders' Research Topics:

*"My research is about the behavioral impacts of restorative justice on Black youth aged 16 to 18. As an aspiring lawyer, this connects directly to my future path."* — **Micah-Kehende Mayers**, Grade 12 Student, AY Jackson Secondary School

## Why choose Video Essay?

*"In Somalia, storytelling is part of our culture—my dad shares stories of his struggles and upbringing, and we're known as the land of poets. Now, in a digital age, video essays feel like a modern way to share those stories."* — **Hadiya Mohamed**, Recent Graduate, Humberside Collegiate Institute

## Storytelling



**Photo Caption:** From left to right — Xavier Jackson and Abigael Ifeoluwa Joaquim, exploring how narrative can convey the pressures and resilience of Black students.

## Projects of Passion — Junior Leaders' Research Topics:

*"My topic is about how academic pressure affects the mental health of Black students, especially immigrants. Coming to Canada from Nigeria, I immediately felt the pressure to succeed in a new community."* — **Abigael Ifeoluwa Joaquim**, Recent Graduate, Westview Centennial Secondary School

## Why Choose Storytelling?

*"Storytelling gives me the freedom to present my topic in the way it needs to be told—as a narrative that people can connect to and relate with."* — **Xavier Jackson**, Recent Graduate, Bloor Collegiate Institute

## Photovoice



**Photo Caption:** From left to right — Makayla Mohammed, Jeneiva Stewart, Suhayla Elawad, and Sumaya Ga Al, capturing research findings through powerful imagery.

*"It allows you to tell your own stories and share life experiences through visuals and captions while capturing emotions."* — **Jeneiva Stewart**, Recent Graduate, York Mills Collegiate Institute

### Projects of Passion — Junior Leaders' Research Topics:

*"Our topic is policing Black lives, examining the experiences of Black youth in the criminal justice system. We aim to expose anti-Black racism and the stereotypes shaping how youth are treated."* — **Jeneiva Stewart**, Recent Graduate, York Mills Collegiate Institute

### Why Choose PhotoVoice?

*"I'm a visual learner, so using photography to show our research helps other visual learners connect with it. Photos express emotions and stories in ways words sometimes can't."* — **Suhayla Elawad** and **Sumaya Bashir**, Grade 11 Students at Newtonbrook Secondary School

# BUILDING TOWARD CHANGE: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By **Donielle Francis**, Peer Mentor

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) places Black youth at the center of inquiry—positioning them not just as participants, but as leaders and **change-makers**.

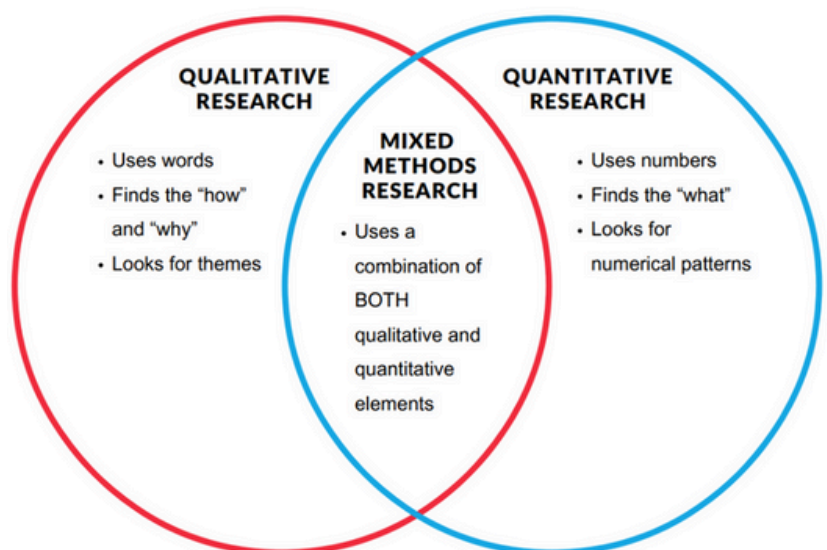
*“Black youth-led research is powerful because it puts the voices, experiences, and ideas of Black youth at the center. We’ve witnessed research being done about our communities without involving the people most affected. Black youth-led research truly reflects YPAR—youth are asking the questions, shaping the focus, and driving the solutions. It recognizes Black youth as knowledge holders whose lived experiences matter.”* — **Nordiah Newell**, Action Research Pod Lead

As youth researchers move through the research process, they uncover themes, findings, and recommendations that not only spark meaningful discussion but also influence policy, practice, and community change.

## Student-Created Tools

During the summer phase, Junior Leaders focus heavily on data collection and analysis, learning to gather, interpret, and synthesize information into actionable recommendations. The **2025 YPAR Training Manual** highlights three primary research methods:

Figure 1: Three Types of Research Methods Used in YPAR



**Photo Caption:** Venn diagram illustrating YPAR’s three primary research methods: interviews, focus groups, and surveys. (Source: BSSLP YPAR Training Manual, 2025)

- **Interviews** — capturing lived experiences and perspectives through guided conversation.
- **Literature Reviews** — drawing from academic and credible sources to deepen understanding of a topic.
- **Focus Groups** — gathering insights from group discussions on shared experiences.
- **Surveys** — collecting data from broad participant pools to identify patterns and trends.

Once data is collected, Junior Leaders engage in **coding**—analyzing their findings to identify themes that guide their recommendations.

## Themes Emerging From Pods

Across different Pods, several strong themes have emerged:

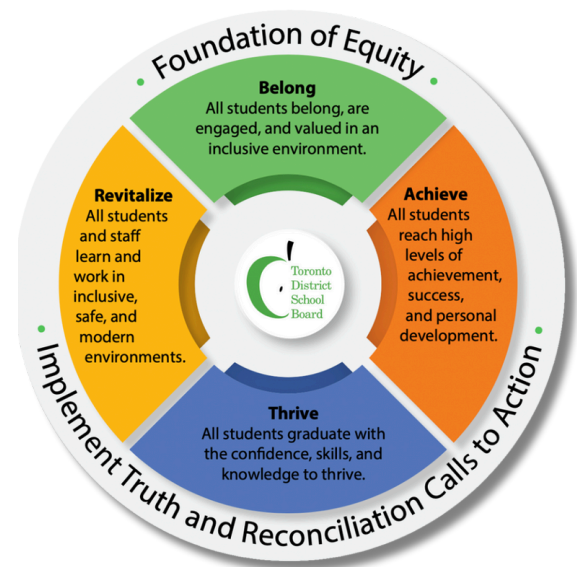
- **Lack of Representation & Negative Media Portrayals** — Students note the persistent absence of Black representation in fields such as law, medicine, and politics, and the harmful stereotypes that circulate in media.
- **Mental Health & Healthcare Disparities** — Youth highlight barriers to mental health support, the impact of food insecurity, and the lack of Black medical professionals as factors eroding trust in healthcare systems.
- **Affirmation of Black Identity in Schools** — Students point to a lack of culturally relevant teaching and support, language barriers for newcomers, and the impact on academic success and inclusion.
- **Anti-Black Racism & Restorative Justice** — Many explore how systemic bias affects students, and propose restorative justice practices as alternatives to punitive systems.
- **Mentorship & Community Belonging** — Positive mentorship experiences are cited as crucial in building a sense of belonging and resilience.



## Youth-Generated Recommendations

Some of the recommendations developed by Junior Leaders for TDSB, schools, and communities include:

- **Culturally Relevant Spaces** — Create spaces that reflect the diverse, intersectional identities of Black youth.
- **Positive Media Representation** — Promote healthy navigation of social media and increase positive depictions of Black communities.
- **Targeted Action Plans** — *From the Action Research Pod:*
  - *A website connecting Black students and families to academic, scholarship, and community resources.*
  - *A TDSB safe space program for Black youth.*
  - *A children's storybook to start early conversations about mental health.*
  - *A digital resource hub featuring Black innovators across disciplines.*
  - *A mentorship and leadership program pairing Black students with professionals in their fields of interest.*



**Photo Caption:** TDSB's Multi-Year Strategic Plan: Building equity at the core, with goals to ensure all students belong, achieve, thrive, and learn in revitalized, inclusive environments.

## Student Testimonies

As the Summer Symposium approaches, Junior Leaders reflect on the significance of sharing their work:

*"I feel good about it because, not only for me, but for all students—it needs to be advocated for. People should be educated about real Black youth experiences through what we've found."* — **Ayube Abdurahman**, Grade 12, Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute

## YPAR Shaping the Future

Conducting research without bias is challenging—perhaps impossible. Historically, studies on Black communities have often been framed through a biased, Eurocentric lens, overshadowing Black voices, stories, and lived experiences with outside perceptions.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) disrupts this pattern. It positions Black students to challenge Eurocentric narratives, confront systemic and intersectional barriers, and reclaim research as a tool for self-determination. For Junior Leaders, the process is deeply personal and profoundly rewarding—allowing them to identify challenges, advocate for change, and transform both policy and perception. Along the way, they experience healing and growth through the transformative power of research led by Black youth.

As **Willis Opondo**, Photovoice Pod Lead, affirms:

*“Black youth-led research is crucial because it redistributes power. It allows youth not only to share their perspectives but also to influence the questions, methods, and solutions. It values lived experience as an important source of knowledge and positions youth as creators of that knowledge. In a system that often silences or distorts Black stories, youth-led research becomes a form of advocacy, healing, and transformation—essential for achieving the societal change they seek.”*

Black youth are changemakers. YPAR equips them with the tools to research, create, and implement solutions that address the needs of their communities. In learning to take up space, speak truth to power, and lead with conviction, these Junior Leaders are shaping a future that reflects their vision. Standing on the shoulders of giants, they are not waiting for change— **they are making it happen.**



# REFLECTION AS RESISTANCE: POSITIONALITY, POWER, AND POSSIBILITY

By **Meron Bayu**, *Peer Mentor Lead*

A core element of the research completed by Junior Leaders is positionality —the understanding of how one's own identity, experiences, and perspective shape their approach to inquiry. For youth researchers, positionality is both a tool and a responsibility: it allows them to draw on their lived realities to create the change they wish to see, while dismantling the often one-dimensional lens used to examine Black youth.

Throughout their YPAR journey, Junior Leaders have engaged in critical discussions about their positionalities, asking questions such as:

- How does the experience of being a Black immigrant student in the school board differ from that of other Black Canadians?
- What role do gender dynamics play in the experiences of Black female students in sports?
- What are the impacts of stigmatizing mental health within the Black community?

These questions highlight the complexity and diversity of their experiences, and the depth of inquiry that positionality makes possible.



**Photo Caption:** Lily McClean participates in the Day 2 welcome segment, speaking at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium.



**Photo Caption:** Aman Musa and Crystal Amondi, present their research at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium.

Conducting Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) demands a commitment to navigating bias while grounding research in authentic lived experience. For Junior Leaders, this means pursuing topics they feel deeply connected to—whether in STEM, sport, education, or other fields—while ensuring their voices remain central to the process. This approach also confronts the power imbalances that often exist in research about youth, shifting ownership of knowledge back to those living the realities being studied.

Storytelling, photography, and music—art forms deeply rooted in Black cultures—continue to serve as powerful vehicles for research expression. In alignment with BSSLP's commitment to Afrocentricity, students are encouraged to present their findings through diverse methods, from narratives and songs to visual installations and community shrines.



**Photo Caption:** Presenting their work with pride, Aryanna Afful and Destiny Davis speak at the YPAR Research Symposium.



**Photo Caption:** Liyah Simm-Smith shares her research findings at the YPAR Research Symposium.

By embracing these creative, culturally grounded approaches, YPAR in the Black Student Summer Leadership Program not only provides a platform for youth to thrive—it also disrupts colonial research practices that have historically erased or distorted Black experiences. Junior Leaders are recognizing the gaps in existing knowledge and stepping into the power of creating spaces where Black humanity is centered, affirmed, and celebrated.



# LEGACY IN MOTION: YOUTH ACTION BEYOND THE PROGRAM

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By **Sahra Mohamud**, Staff Mentor

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is more than a research method—it is a movement that positions youth as experts, advocates, and changemakers. It involves creating knowledge with the community, not just about it.

Through the **Action Research** Pod, returning Junior Leaders build on their prior work to deepen inquiry and sharpen leadership skills. Guided by YPAR Coordinator **Nordiah Newell** and **Dr. Shawnee Hardware**, they explore topics rooted in lived experience, cultural identity, and community resilience—while developing the critical research skills needed to drive real-world action.

## Representation in Classrooms and Media

**Ugo Njoku**, a returning Junior Leader from Malvern Collegiate Institute, has focused her work on the lack of Black representation in TDSB classrooms. She explores how this absence is mirrored in social media and how both shape the educational experiences of Black students.

Reflecting on her first year, **Ugo** acknowledged that her initial recommendations lacked the depth and specificity needed to push for real change:

*"I felt like I didn't do enough in my past research towards showcasing the lack and the effects of the issue. My recommendations were too vague. By creating a website, I can fully put my idea and recommendation into action."*



**Photo Caption:** Ugo Njoku leading focus group discussions to strengthen her advocacy website addressing the lack of Black representation in classrooms and media.

This summer, **Ugo** is using a qualitative approach, conducting focus groups to collect firsthand accounts from students. These insights will strengthen the website she began building last year, transforming it into a practical tool for advocacy and resource-sharing.

Her advice to future Junior Leaders:

*"This experience is so unique. You will gain new skills, information, and relationships. This program is a huge stepping stone for your future and your academic and professional career."*



**Photo Caption:** Lennika Andrews sharing her "Black Belonging" pilot program, designed to create culturally safe spaces where Black students feel seen, valued, and protected.

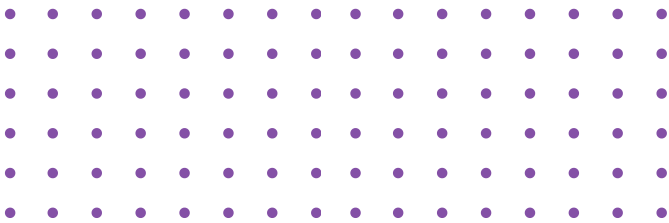
**Culturally Safe Spaces in Education**

For **Lennika Andrews**, an alumna of York Memorial Collegiate Institute, the question guiding her research is deeply personal: Do Black youth in schools feel seen, safe, and supported?

Her own school experiences often left her feeling isolated and pressured to hide parts of herself to fit in. In her first year, **Lennika's** research identified the urgent need for culturally safe spaces in education. This year, she took the next step—designing and testing a pilot program called Black Belonging.

*"My project reflects what I've lived, what I've witnessed, and what I believe we all deserve: spaces where we're seen, valued, and protected."*

**Lennika's** sense of responsibility to the youth who shared their stories drives her commitment to action. She hopes to return again to expand her research and continue advocating for spaces where Black students feel affirmed and protected.



## Removing Barriers to Post-Secondary Success

**Crystal Amondi**, a graduate of *Martin Grove Collegiate Institute*, used her return to the program to revisit her research on the barriers Black students face in accessing and succeeding in post-secondary education.

At last year's YPAR Summer Symposium, she connected with fellow Junior Leader **Aman**, who shared a similar research focus. Their conversation sparked a collaboration that has now evolved into a joint action plan. Together, they are developing a website that provides resources and accessible support for Black students.



**Photo Caption:** Crystal Amondi presenting her collaborative action plan to create an online resource hub that supports Black students in navigating post-secondary education.

*"Being part of this program has shown me the power of research not only as an academic pursuit, but also as a form of advocacy and identity. Continuing this journey in a space that celebrates who I am was something I couldn't pass up."*

Her advice to future participants is both encouraging and grounding:

*"Dear future Junior Researcher, having this title means there's a lot you've already accomplished. Always give yourself grace and credit. You have a rare opportunity to be in a space where your identity is celebrated—take it and run with it."*

These stories reflect the transformative potential of YPAR. When youth are trusted as knowledge creators, they don't just envision change—they lead it. This is not the end of their journey but the beginning of new paths as researchers, advocates, and leaders. With every question asked and truth uncovered, they are building a legacy of resistance, brilliance, and possibility.

The future isn't waiting for them.

They are shaping it now.



# BEHIND THE MIC: KRYSTA COOKE'S IMPACT ON THE AI PODCAST PROJECT

By **Tanitiã Munroe**, Senior Research Coordinator, and **Sahra Mohamud**, Staff Mentor

*How one researcher turned mentorship into momentum for our peer mentors.*

When our Peer Mentors took on producing a podcast on AI in K–12 education, they weren't just creating an audio project—they were stepping into roles as researchers, interviewers, and storytellers. **Krysta Cooke**, a researcher and University of Toronto Master of Social Work graduate with a background in children and families, brought a rare blend of academic expertise, project management skill, and community-based vision to the work.



**Photo Caption:** Krysta Cooke, Research Lead for the Peer Mentors.

Drawing on her experience managing complex research projects for universities, government ministries, and community organizations, **Krysta** guided the mentors far beyond the technical aspects of podcasting. She coached them on refining research questions, structuring interviews, thinking critically about AI's ethical implications, and translating findings into compelling, accessible narratives.

As a member of the larger research team, **Krysta** also engaged with student leaders across the program's creative pods—learning alongside them as they explored mediums such as storytelling, visual arts, and performance to bring their research to life. This cross-pod collaboration deepened her connection to the program's vision and ensured that her insights benefitted the wider community of learners.

Her role also extended into other aspects of the Peer Mentors' journey—supporting them in public speaking, leadership development, and collaborative problem-solving. Working alongside Research Coordinator **Tanitiã Munroe**, one of the program's leads, **Krysta** also provided critical behind-the-scenes support to staff mentor **Sahra** and Peer Mentor Lead **Meron**, ensuring the entire project team had the resources, encouragement, and structure they needed to succeed.

This work reflects the core truth of our program: “It takes a village.” **Krysta's** deep commitment to youth-led research, her ability to bridge academia and community, and her quiet yet powerful leadership have left an indelible mark—not only on the podcast, but on the confidence and growth of every mentor involved.

*“Krysta didn't just help us make a podcast—she helped us see ourselves as researchers who have something important to say.” — Peer Mentors*



**Photo Caption:** Celebrating one another's success, Junior Leaders applaud their peer at the 2025 Black Student Summer Leadership Program Research Symposium.

# CONCLUSION

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By Tanitiã Munroe, **Senior Research Coordinator**

As we close this third edition of Voices of Transformation, we return to where we began—with the understanding that when we lead with youth voice, we are not just making space. We are making history.

This summer, Black youth joined the Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) as researchers, visionaries, and advocates. Through Pods in Creative Arts & Musicology, Storytelling, Photovoice, Podcast, and Video Essay, and through the Action Research Pod for returning students, these Junior Leaders engaged in a research process rooted in Afrocentric traditions, guided by the principles of **Ubuntu**, and grounded in their lived experiences.

Together with the all-Black/African research team from the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement, they moved through every stage of the YPAR process—from critical inquiry to creative presentation—reclaiming research as something that belongs to them. Something that reflects their realities, honours their communities, and builds toward justice.

Their work doesn't end here. It continues at the upcoming BSSLP Summer Research Symposium, where students will present their findings, share their recommendations, and engage in dialogue with educators, families, and system leaders. It is a powerful close to the summer—and a bold opening to the future.

We are deeply grateful to the George Brown College team for welcoming us into this post-secondary space and ensuring that our Junior Leaders could see themselves thriving in such an environment. Special thanks to **Dr. Gervan Fearon** for his warm welcome and visionary leadership, and to **Dr. Terry McQuaid** for ensuring we had all that we needed to make this summer a success. Having Black youth work, learn, and present in a post-secondary setting is not only affirming—it expands their vision of what is possible and affirms that they belong in these spaces as scholars, leaders, and changemakers.

What we've learned is that when Black youth are given tools, trust, and support, they will not only rise—**they will lead.**





**Photo Caption:** Presenting with confidence, Raheem Acheampong delivers his research findings at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium.



**Photo Caption:** Elyse Fisher-Uriarte presents research findings at the 2025 BSSLP Summer Symposium.

Where our institutions value their knowledge.

Where their questions shape policy.

Where their stories are respected as data.

Where they are seen—not just as students—but as scholars, strategists, and agents of change.

This work is cyclical. It is intergenerational. It is ongoing.

And it calls on all of us to continue building and sustaining the structures that make this kind of liberation work possible.

To the Junior Leaders: thank you for your brilliance, your courage, and your care.

You carry the torch—and you are lighting the way.

To our readers: the future is already here. The question is—are we ready to follow their lead?

# Meet the Peer Mentors: The Storytellers and Visionaries Who Brought This Third Edition to Life!



**From left to right:** Akaiah Carter-Sam (Graduate of David and Mary Thompson CI), Donielle Francis (Graduate, Delphi Secondary Alternative School), Sophia Barnett (Graduate, Newtonbrook Secondary School, and Sachiel Andre (Graduate, Wexford Collegiate School for the Arts).

**Not pictured:** Meron Bayu (Peer Mentor Lead and Second-Year Student, University of Toronto) and Sahra Mohamud (TDSB Educator and PhD Student at OISE).

*Pictured during the celebration of Emancipation Day at Blackhurst Cultural Centre as the Peer Mentors represented the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement and the Toronto District School Board's Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP).*