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Black Students in English Montreal Schools

A Youth Participatory Action Research Project

Montreal, Quebec | October 2026

Research Brief

By Voices of Youth on Black Education (VYBE) Research Team

Meet the VYBE Research Team



Israel Glover

Youth Research Partner

Israel Glover (he/him) is a Grade 11 student interested in science, history and technology. In education research, he is curious about how students' stories reveal their experiences at school. Israel enjoys listening to people's stories and learning everything he can from the world around him.



Kanaya Clayton

Youth Research Partner

Kanaya Clayton (she/her) is a Grade 10 student interested in history and the rights and experiences of marginalized groups, including Black, Indigenous and Jewish peoples and women. In education research, she explores how learning can challenge ignorance and promote understanding. She enjoys researching and educating herself on diverse topics.



Taneia Hinkson-Belone

Youth Research Partner

Taneia Hinkson-Belone (she/her) is a Grade 11 student at Lower Canada College. An accomplished public speaker and academic achiever, she is interested in how student voices can challenge injustice in education. Through leadership and advocacy, Taneia works to create opportunities for future generations.



Naailah Agadzi

Youth Research Partner

Naailah Agadzi (she/her) is a Grade 11 student passionate about education, dance and community involvement. She is interested in how students grow through academic challenge and creative expression. Naailah performs dance internationally and is dedicated to personal growth, giving back to her community and making a positive impact on others.



Kaeyan Agadzi

Youth Research Partner

Kaeyan Agadzi (he/him) is a Grade 9 student with roots in Trinidad and Ghana. He is interested in how sports and the arts shape students' confidence and sense of belonging at school. A drummer who performs internationally, Kaeyan also plays basketball, football and soccer and gives back to his community.



Jayda Smith

Research Assistant

Jayda Smith is a master's student in English Literature and Creative Writing at Concordia University. Originally from Belize, where resources for young people are limited, she is passionate about working with and for youth in creative and academic settings.



Julian Grau-Brown

Research Assistant

Julian Grau-Brown is a doctoral student in social work at McGill University and a social worker. His work focuses on youth participation, the experiences of Black communities, and the intergenerational effects of incarceration. Since June 2026, he has worked with Professor Tya Collins to support the project's youth researchers.



Tya Collins

Researcher

Dr. Tya Collins is an Assistant Professor of Black Youth Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Her research examines the intersections of race, language, disability, and educational inequities, with a particular focus on Black youth experiences.

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About the Project

RESEARCH FOCUS

This project explored the everyday school experiences of Black youth attending English-language schools in Montreal, how they understand their identity, build a sense of belonging, and navigate their educational paths in a context where language, culture, and race intersect.

YOUTH LED APPROACH

Five youth aged 14–16 were trained as Youth Research Partners (YRPs) in research methods, ethics, interviewing, and data analysis. Working collaboratively with the research team, they developed research questions, conducted peer interviews, analyzed findings, formulated recommendations, and co-authored research reports, reflecting a "by youth, for youth" approach throughout the project.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Twelve Black youth aged 15–17, enrolled from Grade 9 through CEGEP, participated in interviews. They attended English-language public and private schools across Montreal and represented diverse Caribbean, African, and Canadian heritages.

What We Heard

School can feel isolating when you are one of very few Black students. Some participants faced challenges like racism and not fitting in, and coped by ignoring it, keeping their feelings in, or leaning on friends and trusted adults. Others thrived: they did well academically, loved school, or had no issues at all. Experiences were diverse and numerous. The highlights in this brief were the ones prioritized by the Youth Research Partners.

01 Minority within the minority

Participants described feeling like they don't fully belong — too different to fully fit within the community at school, and also not feeling like they fit in with the Black French-speaking majority in Montreal, while also standing out as one of few Black students in their school.

"I am one of the only Black people there."
— Lauren, 15

"Rather than just being myself at school... there's a part of me that switches to fit in with everyone there. At home I'm just myself, but at school I'm trying to fit in rather than being 100% me."
— Jessica, 16

02 "I just wish I could speak more French"

Most participants want to speak French and are hyper-aware that it matters, but many don't reach fluency and blame themselves.

"Being in the enriched program, my French grades kind of tanked... I became self-conscious about oral projects in French because other students came from French backgrounds."
— Frisk, 16

"I just wish I could speak French more so that my living would be more comfortable here and I could [...] get like better jobs."
— Kayla, 16

03 Racialized experiences and microaggressions

Participants described dealing with racist incidents and everyday microaggressions, alongside pressure to code-switch. They also highlighted school initiatives (like Black History Month) that can feel performative rather than substantive.

"The kids at my school have done blackface... said the n-word..."
— Victoria, 16

"Like for other types of things, like um LGBTQ or bullying awareness, we have a whole entire assembly for it, and it's more recognized. We have t-shirts, we have um tests about it, everything. But then [...] there's almost nothing being done during Black History Month, besides them trying to give out Jamaican patties"
— Sansa, 15

04 Unequal disciplinary consequences

Several participants perceived Black students to face harsher consequences for minor issues, while peers who direct racist behaviour at them face little to no consequence.

> "...it's so annoying, and I have to keep going to the office for it, and they do not a thing. I have to call my mom, then she has to call the school, and... there's nothing being done"
> — Sansa, 15

> "There can be neglectful staff members who push concerns aside."
> — Frisk, 16

05 Coping and finding support

Participants coped with hardships by ignoring them, internalizing their emotions, or avoiding adults and administration to "protect their energy". At the same time, youth who found trusted adults, safe spaces, or activities like sports, described these as what helped them get through hard moments.

> "We have a safe space at school ... a place where you can go at lunch, relax, and talk to a teacher."
> — Jadoni, 15

> "You got to just ignore it... me getting mad about it isn't changing anything. You're going to continue to do it just because you feel like that's funny."
> — Layla, 17

Note: Pseudonyms were employed in all cases to protect participant confidentiality.

Our Interpretations

What helps

- Trusted adults and safe spaces at school, like teachers who make time to connect and places to go at lunch.
- A strong group of friends.
- Activities like sports, which offer a healthy outlet and a sense of belonging.
- Growing comfort in French, which eases day-to-day life at school and in Quebec.

What gets in the way

- Being one of very few Black students, which creates isolation and unwanted pressure to represent or defend an entire community.
- Inconsistent or weak accountability when racist incidents occur, which signals to students that this behaviour is tolerated.
- Curriculum and school initiatives that treat Black history and identity as a once-a-year add-on rather than an everyday part of school life.
- Pressure to code-switch and to numb or suppress reactions to racism just to get through the school day, which can mask how widespread the problem really is.

Our Recommendations

For our schools

- Take racism as seriously as vaping, fighting, skipping class, or not respecting uniform.
- Create a way for students to name microaggressions and actually address them.
- Give French language support that acknowledges pressure about belonging and identity.
- Incorporate Black history into the formal curriculum (not only Black History Month).

For our peers

- Talk to someone who you can confide in.
- Don't take racism lightly; confront it.
- Always believe in yourself, no matter what!

For our families and communities

- Make more community-led safe spaces since we can't curate many inside of these schools.
- Pay attention to the toll anti-Black racism has on our mental health.
- Don't just praise achievement; ask how we're feeling, not just how we're performing.

Want to learn more or get involved? Contact the research team at tya.collins@uottawa.ca.

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