



**SAMUEL CENTRE  
FOR SOCIAL  
CONNECTEDNESS**

# **Investigating Anti-Racism and Belonging**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1989, Coastal Research, Education, and Advocacy Network is a non-profit organization dedicated to research, education, and advocacy for vulnerable British Columbia residents. Our research team are experts with years of experience working with diverse research participants, including but not limited to, youth, women, visible minorities (including immigrants, refugees), local First Nations communities, and street involved individuals. CREAN publishes research on community-identified needs, partners with organizations to co-author research, and also provides research consulting services to the nonprofit sector. We have published and copublished over 100 research reports, and our team of researchers have individually authored/co authored more than 10 peer-reviewed publications. In addition to speaking English, our research team is also fluent in French, Creole, Punjabi, and Spanish.

Since 2018, the Coastal Research, Education, & Advocacy Network (CREAN) has been working on the Anti-Racism in the Education System project (ARIE), in collaboration with schools, organizations, and community members in British Columbia (BC). The project aims to understand the racism that exists within BC public schools, make recommendations for the implementation of anti-racism initiatives, advocate for racialized students, and improve educational outcomes. Education town halls, workshops, training sessions, one-on-one meetings, and social media outreach began in 2018 to help determine the goals of the project and set up a research advisory committee. Since then, a literature review and an online survey with Victoria High School (one in 2021, one in 2023) have been conducted to better understand student experiences of racism. In collaboration with community partners, and with continued

input from the research advisory committee, CREAN is holding anti-racism workshops for middle and high school educators in 2023 and 2024, with curriculum built from the findings of the ARIE project.

This report is influenced by a range of scholars and communities that critically examine the experiences of Black and racialized youth in educational settings. In the literature to come, I am particularly drawing on the works of scholars like George Dei, Anne Niitamo, and Joanna Tzenis, whose ethnographic and longitudinal studies provide insights into how Black and immigrant students navigate systemic barriers in education; with an emphasis on their belongingness. Dei's work on Black student disengagement in Toronto, for example, provides a foundational framework for understanding how racialized youth experience alienation in schools. Similarly, Niitamo's research in Finland highlights the challenges of cultural and linguistic discontinuity, which are reflected in the struggles faced by Somali and other racialized youth in Canadian schools.

I am also informed by lived experiences from within the Somali community in Toronto, and more broadly, the BIPOC community in British Columbia. The educational and social challenges faced by Somali and racialized youth in these areas—particularly around issues of exclusion, lack of representation, and the impact of racist incidents—shape the core focus of this research.

### ***1.1 What is Your Positionality in This Research?***

I was born in Toronto and raised in areas with a significant Somali population, consisting primarily of first- and second-generation Somalis. Growing up, I witnessed and experienced the systemic barriers that Somali youth, like me, faced in navigating

public and educational spaces. These challenges were not just isolated to individual experiences but reflected larger systemic issues within the school system and broader society, where racism, cultural insensitivity, and a lack of representation were persistent problems. As I engaged more with educational spaces, both as a student and now as a researcher, I encountered the same inequities that exist in public life, mirrored in the very institutions meant to provide opportunities for social mobility. My personal struggles with identity, belonging, and navigating systemic racism deeply inform my research focus. I approach this work with a strong sense of responsibility to my community and a desire to understand how Somali and other racialized youth construct their identities in environments that are often hostile or dismissive of their experiences.

At the same time, I am acutely aware of the ethical concerns surrounding research in marginalized communities. I have grappled with the tension between producing research that highlights the challenges faced by Somali and Black youth without perpetuating deficit narratives or pathologizing their experiences. This tension has shaped my approach, as I strive to create research that not only documents challenges, but also highlights the agency, resilience, and power of Somali and Black youth as they navigate and resist oppressive structures.

## ***1.2 Project Background & Purpose***

CREAN has been working on the ARIE (Anti-Racism in the Education System) project since 2018. Despite ongoing recognition of the need for the collection of demographic data, and the creation and implementation of specific anti-racism policies and legislation across Canada, there continues to be a lack of research and attention

paid to the experiences of racialized students in the school system. The ARIE project aims to address this gap and provides research that will support the implementation of anti-racism policy in the Canadian education system.

Organizations in coastal British Columbia conducting similar work include the Black Youth Empowerment Group in Victoria, BC, and Urban Matters/the Vancouver School Board; recent research results and initiatives by these groups are highly relevant and congruent to this project and continue to inform CREAN's efforts.

## **2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

### **2.1 Survey**

The overall objective of the ARIE project is to understand the racism that exists within the BC secondary school system, and using these findings, make recommendations for the implementation of anti-racism initiatives. This topic was brought to CREAN's attention by racist incidents in the BC school district, BIPOC students, their parents, and school staff members. As there is little research on racism within the BC education system, where data on racialized student outcomes is often not kept, not much is known about the experiences of racialized students and systemic barriers (e.g. policies, practices) that they experience. CREAN researchers have utilized an anti-racist, mixed-methods approach using qualitative and quantitative research methods to respond to concerns raised through community input; particularly through the creation of a survey.

## **2.2 Focus Group**

By directly involving parents in the research process, the project aimed to develop targeted recommendations to foster more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

The methodology of the project centered around focus groups designed specifically for parents of BIPOC students. These focus groups served as a critical platform where parents openly discussed their children's experiences with racism, how schools handled racist incidents, and the inclusivity (or lack thereof) in the school curriculum. Parents were encouraged to share both positive and negative stories about their children's time at school, with questions guiding them to reflect on how racism impacted their children's emotional and academic development. Through these discussions, the research team collected valuable qualitative data, helping to shape actionable recommendations for school policy reforms.

The focus group format also allowed parents to interact with one another, creating a collaborative space where their collective experiences illuminated systemic issues within the educational system. Their contributions informed the development of anti-racism policies, while providing crucial insights into the effectiveness of school resources for BIPOC students. The findings from these focus groups were shared with educational policymakers and contributed to broader community advocacy efforts aimed at supporting racialized students in BC schools.

## **2.3 Core Research Questions**

The core questions of this project are the following:



1. What do the terms belonging/social connectedness mean to racialized youth in BC?
  - a. What does it look like when belonging and social connectedness are present in communities of racialized youth?
2. How can we know if/when racialized youth feel a strong sense of belonging and social connectedness in schools? What are some indicators?
3. How does racism in school impact racialized youths' wellbeing and belonging?
4. What anti-racist initiatives and activities in schools are the most effective at increasing racialized students' sense of social connectedness and belonging?
5. What are examples of where anti-racism initiatives and activities have increased racialized youths' sense OF connection, wellbeing and belonging?
6. Are there other indicators of wellbeing and belonging that should be included (i.e., sense of autonomy, or respect)? (Case studies outside of Canada and within are encouraged)

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The influential work of George Dei et al. (1997) serves as one of the earliest ethnographic explorations into the disengagement of Black Canadian students in the Greater Toronto Area, offering invaluable insights into belongingness among Black youth in education. Over the course of a careful 3-year study, Dei et al. (1997) delve into the complex interplay of social, structural, and institutional barriers that contribute to the alienation and lack of belonging felt by Black students in the educational system. Their

findings highlight systemic racism, cultural insensitivity, and a lack of representation in curricula as key barriers to fostering a sense of belonging for these students. The study stresses the urgent need for systemic reforms that prioritize inclusivity and equity, thus enhancing students' sense of belonging within educational programs.

Belongingness is equally pertinent to addressing the educational disparities experienced by Black youth, who often encounter similar barriers to engagement and success. The insights from Dei et al.'s work provide a crucial framework for understanding and addressing the ways in which Black youth, in particular, experience or are deprived of a sense of belonging within educational settings, underscoring the importance of systemic-wide reforms to foster an inclusive environment where all students can thrive.

Education is often viewed as a key pathway for the social advancement and assimilation of first- and second-generation immigrants. However, belongingness within the school environment can be significantly challenged by barriers rooted in structural inequality. Anne Niitamo's (2004; 2002) research in Finland offers a framework for understanding why second-generation Black African students may struggle to develop a sense of belonging in academic environments. She identifies "cultural and linguistic discontinuity" (p. 20) within Finnish society as a major barrier, creating a disconnect between students and their schools. Her study emphasizes that these struggles are not inherent to Black students, but are shaped by the social conditions that hinder their ability to feel a sense of belonging.

Niitamo highlights the role of racism, prejudice, and the erosion of family and kinship ties in undermining belongingness for Black youth in schools. This research is

relevant to understanding the experiences of Black youth in Toronto, where systemic racism often goes overlooked, and where belongingness is similarly jeopardized. Schools that fail to create spaces of cultural understanding or fail to address racial disparities contribute to feelings of exclusion, alienation, and disengagement for Black youth.

Ighodaro's thesis (1997) further illuminates the importance of belongingness by investigating how discrimination affects the aspirations and sense of self among young Black students in the Metro-Toronto school system. Ighodaro recognizes that this lack of belonging is compromised not by a single source but by multiple interconnected factors, including cultural insensitivity and a lack of understanding from teachers. These barriers erode the sense of belonging in Black students that is essential for their academic success and personal well-being. His findings reinforce the need to prioritize belongingness within educational reforms to ensure that Black students can see themselves reflected and valued in school environments.

Similarly, Joanna A. Tzenis's longitudinal study on the educational aspirations of Black youth in Minnesota connects belongingness with career aspirations. While the youth initially express aspirations grounded in familial values—such as becoming doctors to support their communities—exposure to non-diasporic environments in school shifts their focus to more individualized pursuits. This shift highlights how belongingness within both diasporic and non-diasporic contexts influences the evolving nature of students' aspirations and their sense of self. The study demonstrates how belongingness, both within the family unit and school environments, plays a crucial role in shaping students' educational goals and their identities.

Murray Forman (2001) underscores high schools as key sites where belongingness is negotiated, especially for Black immigrant and refugee youth navigating unfamiliar social attitudes and cultural codes. The institutional discourses surrounding “nationhood and otherness” (Forman, 2001, p.1) can impede a student’s sense of belonging, reinforcing structures of social difference that alienate Black youth. The interplay between cultural identities and social adaptation further complicates belongingness for Black students, who must often balance conformity with resistance in educational contexts.

Moreover, Bic Ngo's ethnographic study on Lao American students shows how rigid narratives that dichotomize success and failure can further challenge their belongingness. These narratives often fail to acknowledge the agency and complexity of immigrant youth identities, instead imposing limiting perceptions that alienate them from fully belonging to their school communities. Ngo argues that recognizing and celebrating the contradictions and nuances of immigrant youth identities is essential for their belongingness.

Finally, Hampton’s (2010) exploration of Afrocentric schools offers an alternative vision for belongingness by advocating for community-based educational programs that are tailored to the experiences and needs of Black students. These schools create environments where Black youth can feel a sense of belonging rooted in cultural affirmation and community support, and thereby addressing the alienation they experience in mainstream educational settings.

In sum, belongingness is a fundamental aspect of the educational experiences of Black and immigrant youth in North America. Whether through systemic barriers,

cultural dissonance, or family influences, belongingness—or the lack thereof—plays a crucial role in shaping students’ aspirations, identity formation, and overall engagement with education. By centering belongingness in educational reform efforts, we can work toward creating spaces that not only include Black youth, but actively support their development and success.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### ***4.1 Study Design & Approach***

In the first phase of the AIRE project (2018-2020), research questions were developed and information about the current educational context was gathered. Collaboration with youth, parents, teachers, and community informed the research approach. A research advisory committee of community members was formed to provide input to the project at every stage. In the second project phase (2021-2022), CREAN researchers conducted a literature review and online survey to understand more about race, racism, and anti-racism in the BC high school system. CREAN partnered with Victoria High School to conduct an online survey in 2021 examining student experiences of racism.

In the third and ongoing project phase (2024), carried through by me, we created an updated survey to run with students and parents in the Greater Victoria and Vancouver area. The online survey was filled out by 61 students (grades 9-12) situated in the Greater Victoria and Greater Vancouver area on SurveyMonkey from August 2024 to September 2024. Fifty percent of student respondents identified as either African, East Asian, Indigenous, Latin/South/Central American, South Asian, or

Southeast Asian (n=20). Thirty percent identified as White (n=12), while 20% identified as 'other' (n=8).

## **4.2 Survey Methods**

The ARIE survey, conducted through SurveyMonkey, employed a mixed methods approach to capture both quantitative and qualitative data on students' and parents' experiences with racism, belonging, and inclusivity in the British Columbia education system. The survey consisted of a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing participants to provide structured responses while also offering space for more nuanced, detailed narratives.

## **4.3 Data Collection Process**

### **1. Survey Design**

The survey was designed to collect a comprehensive range of responses, with closed-ended questions using Likert scales and demographic options to gather quantifiable data. Open-ended questions were incorporated to allow participants, especially students and parents from racialized backgrounds, to express their experiences and perceptions in their own words. This qualitative aspect was essential for understanding the depth of their experiences beyond the traditional quantitative metrics.

### **2. Survey Distribution**

The survey was distributed to students and parents in the Greater Victoria and Vancouver regions from August to September 2024. Participants were recruited through school networks, community organizations, and social media, with a total of 61 students completing the survey.

### **3. Data Cleaning**

Upon closing the survey, the dataset was first cleaned by removing incomplete entries, such as responses that were left blank or where participants abandoned the survey midway. Responses that were deemed irrelevant or that fell outside the scope of the project (e.g., unrelated comments) were also excluded to ensure data integrity.

## ***4.4 Data Analysis***

### **1. Quantitative Analysis**

For the closed-ended responses, descriptive statistics were generated to identify key patterns and trends. Likert scale data was used to assess the overall sentiment and frequency of experiences related to racism, belonging, and safety within schools. This quantitative analysis allowed us to map out correlations between student demographics and their reported experiences.

### **2. Qualitative Analysis**

Open-ended responses were subjected to a thematic analysis. All qualitative data was coded manually by myself and other research assistants to identify recurring themes, patterns, and unique insights. Themes such as parental involvement, student experiences with racism, and the emotional impacts of exclusion were explored in depth. Coding involved categorizing responses according to these themes and examining how they varied across different student groups.

## **5. FINDINGS**

This section of the report summarizes the key findings of our survey conducted to understand the racial and ethnic composition, religious affiliations, sexual orientations,

and experiences of racism and harassment among school participants. The survey aimed to explore how racism can affect students' sense of belonging and comfort in their educational environment.

### ***5.1 Racial and Ethnic Identities (Figure 2)***

The largest group of participants (51.16%) identified as African, representing many of the survey respondents. South Asians comprised 13.95%, making them the second-largest group, followed by Southeast Asians and East Asians, each accounting for 9.30%. Notably, 9.30% of the respondents identified as "Other" ethnicities, reflecting a broad spectrum of backgrounds within the participant pool. Latin/South/Central Americans and those who preferred not to disclose their racial identity each constituted 4.65% of the respondents, while Australian/Pacific Islanders and West Asians made up 2.33% each.

### ***5.2 Religious Affiliations (Figure 3)***

The most reported religious affiliation was Christianity, with 34.88% of respondents identifying as Christian. Catholics made up 16.28% of the participants, while 11.63% were Muslim and another 11.63% reported no religious affiliation. The rest of the respondents were divided among other religious groups: Anglicans and Pentecostals (4.65% each), Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, United Church members, and Jews (each 2.33%). A small group (2.33%) selected "Other."

### ***5.3 Sexual Orientation (Figure 4)***

Many participants (79.07%) identified as straight, followed by 11.63% who identified as bisexual. A smaller portion, 4.65%, identified as something other than the



listed options or were unsure about their orientation, while 2.33% identified as gay or lesbian. One participant (2.33%) reported being unsure of their sexual orientation.

#### ***5.4 Gender Identity (Figure 5)***

Most participants (55.81%) identified as female, while 41.86% identified as male. A small portion (2.33%) identified as something other than the traditional male/female binary.

#### ***5.5. Experiences of Racist Remarks and Harassment (Figures 17 & 18)***

##### **5.5.1 Impact of Racist Remarks on Belonging (Figure 17)**

Out of the 41 respondents who answered the question, 29.27% felt that racist remarks "moderately" affected their sense of belonging at school, and 26.83% reported that such remarks had a "significant" impact. Around 21.95% reported that these experiences "extremely" affected their sense of belonging. However, 9.76% stated that these remarks did not affect their sense of belonging at all, and another 9.76% indicated only a slight impact. One respondent was undecided.

##### **5.5.2 Microaggressions and Harassment (Figure 18)**

When asked about experiencing microaggressions or harassment based on race, 31.71% of respondents reported experiencing this "often," while 29.27% experienced it "sometimes." A smaller portion, 14.63%, always experienced such incidents, while 9.76% rarely did. Notably, 12.2% stated that they never experienced microaggressions or harassment based on their race.

## ***5.6 Reporting and Satisfaction with Handling of Racist Incidents (Figure 19 & 20)***

### **5.6.1 Reporting of Racist Incidents (Figure 19)**

Out of 62 respondents, 68.29% reported incidents of racial harassment to school staff. However, 21.95% did not report such incidents, and 9.76% chose N/A.

### **5.6.2 Satisfaction with Handling of Incidents (Figure 20)**

Respondents reported mixed satisfaction with how schools handled reported racist incidents. While 17.07% were "significantly" satisfied and 14.63% were "extremely" satisfied, a notable portion expressed dissatisfaction: 9.76% were "not at all" satisfied, and 14.63% were only "slightly" satisfied. Another 21.95% felt "moderately" satisfied.

## ***5.7 Avoidance of Spaces Due to Safety Concerns (Figure 9)***

A significant percentage of participants (43.90%) reported avoiding the cafeteria or lunchroom due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable. Other avoided spaces included bathrooms (34.15%), locker rooms (31.71%), and school buses (29.27%). Hallways and gym classes were also frequently avoided, along with school grounds and athletic fields.

## ***5.8. Avoiding School Functions and Considering Changing Schools (Figures 10 & 11)***

### **5.8.1 Avoidance of School Functions (Figure 10)**

Approximately 29.27% of respondents "often" avoided school functions due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable, and 26.83% avoided them "sometimes." A smaller group (19.51%) always avoided these functions.

### **5.8.2 Consideration of Changing Schools (Figure 11)**

A significant portion of respondents (26.83%) considered changing schools "always" or "often" due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable. Only 17.07% stated that they "never" considered switching schools.

### **5.9 Sense of Belonging at School (Figure 12)**

When asked about their sense of belonging, 26.83% of respondents said they "rarely" felt a sense of belonging at school, while 24.39% felt a sense of belonging "often." However, 21.95% only "sometimes" felt connected, and 12.20% reported never feeling a sense of belonging at school.

## **6. OPEN ENDED SURVEY RESPONSE**

In response to the 16<sup>th</sup> question, *what does belonging mean to you*, students reported:

### **1. Inclusiveness and Respect**

- "Inclusiveness and when I am treated with respect and regard."
- "Where you feel accepted as one or family."
- "Belonging means feeling like I fit in with my peers and teachers, and that my cultural background is respected and valued."

### **2. Safety and Acceptance**

- "To feel accepted and safe in school by students, teachers, and staff."
- "Belonging means feeling safe and being able to express myself without judgment."
- "To feel loved regardless of any faults physically and mentally."

### **3. Connection and Support**

- "Cultural connection, sense of safety, inclusive environment, community support, and feeling accepted and valued."
- "A community of people who truly see you and encourage you and value you."
- "Having a solid group of black friends."

### **4. Emotional Well-Being**

- "A sense of belonging refers to the emotional experience of being accepted, valued, and connected to a group or community."
- "It is about peace and acceptance in a place where you feel understood."
- "Being included in activities and not being avoided because I wear a hijab."
- "Being able to be unapologetically you without being discriminated against for who you are."
- "Being accepted and welcomed into a space."

### **5. Personal and Community Role**

- "Being a responsible and contributing member of my community."
- "I'm a major part of the school system."
- "Being seen as the person I am, without it being affected by my appearance."

## **6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings from the third phase of the ARIE project provide a detailed snapshot of students' experiences of race, racism, and sense of belonging within the British Columbia high school system. The survey data collected between August and September 2024 highlight, not only the diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds of the respondents, but also the widespread experiences of exclusion, harassment, and discomfort faced by students of color. These insights into the systemic and personal

challenges of belonging and safety emphasize the ongoing necessity for targeted anti-racist efforts in schools.

### ***6.1 Theme 1: Experiences of Racism and Microaggressions***

A significant proportion of students reported experiences of racist remarks and microaggressions, with nearly one-third (31.71%) indicating that they experienced these incidents "often," and another 14.63% reporting that such incidents occurred "always." This high prevalence of racial harassment underlines the pervasive nature of racism within school environments, which has a tangible impact on students' sense of belonging. The data show that such remarks and actions have a moderate to extreme impact on many students' school lives, suggesting that racism is a barrier to creating an inclusive and welcoming educational environment. Furthermore, the findings suggest that although many students report incidents of racial harassment, satisfaction with how these reports are handled remains mixed. This discrepancy points to a gap between policy and practice, where schools may have reporting mechanisms in place, but the response may not fully or adequately address the emotional and psychological toll on students (a finding also established in our 2021 survey).

### ***6.2 Theme 2: Sense of Belonging and School Avoidance***

The data also reveals troubling patterns of school avoidance, particularly related to perceived safety concerns. Almost half of the participants (43.90%) reported avoiding certain school spaces such as cafeterias or bathrooms due to discomfort or fear of racial harassment. This pattern of avoidance suggests that racialized students often navigate their educational environments by avoiding spaces that are integral to their everyday social and academic life, which can further exacerbate feelings of isolation.

Additionally, the avoidance of school functions and consideration of changing schools—reported by nearly 30% of students—further highlights how deeply entrenched racial exclusion can hinder not only academic engagement, but also students' overall well-being and overall connection to the school structure.

### ***6.3 Theme 3: Intersection of Identity and Experiences***

The intersectional lens offered by the ARIE survey allows for a nuanced understanding of how students' racial and ethnic identities, religious affiliations, and sexual orientations shape their experiences in schools. For example, a substantial number of students identifying as African (51.16%) and South Asian (13.95%) suggest that students from marginalized communities are disproportionately represented in the survey. Their shared experiences of exclusion and marginalization underscore how race and ethnicity are often salient factors in their daily school lives. Additionally, religious minorities, such as Muslim students (11.63%), likely face unique challenges navigating their identities in a predominantly secular or Christian-oriented environment.

The data related to sexual orientation and gender identity reveal additional layers of vulnerability, as those identifying outside traditional gender binaries or as non-heteronormative may also experience compounded marginalization. Schools that fail to address these multiple axes of identity and discrimination risk alienating these students even further.

### ***6.4 Implications for Anti-Racism Work***

These findings emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive, systemic anti-racist interventions in schools. The varied experiences of students across racial and ethnic identities call for school policies and practices that go beyond surface-level

diversity initiatives; and ones that focus on creating safe, inclusive, and affirming spaces for all students. Addressing the frequent occurrence of microaggressions and racial harassment requires a deeper cultural shift, whereby staff and students alike are equipped with the skills and understanding to combat racism in all its ugly forms.

Additionally, the dissatisfaction reported by many students regarding the handling of racist incidents suggests that schools must revisit their racism response protocols. Adequate antiracism training for teachers and administrators must be streamlined, so that staff are equipped with how to sensitively and effectively manage racial harassment to ensure that reporting mechanisms are not only available, but also effective.

#### ***6.4 Limitations and Future Directions***

While surveys can be very useful tools for collecting information, some challenges arose with the anonymity of the survey. CREAN is working to collaboratively address these challenges. One issue is that if minors disclose abuse or harm in research, researchers may have a duty to report this information. This is not possible if a survey is anonymous. However, the anonymity of the survey is also very important, as it allows students a safe place to share things they otherwise may not; CREAN has heard informally that anonymous survey data provided by students has been of great value to schools. It can also be difficult to protect confidentiality with small groups. For this and other reasons, it is important to use other methods (interviews, focus groups, etc.) to triangulate data and provide important context to the research.

In conclusion, the findings from the ARIE project underscore the critical role schools play in shaping students' experiences of inclusion and belonging. Anti-racist

policies, while crucial, must be part of a broader, ongoing commitment to systemic change that addresses the lived realities of students from marginalized communities.

## **6.5 Focus Group**

The focus group aimed to capture the lived experiences of parents of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students in British Columbia schools. The discussions revealed recurring themes of racial discrimination, inadequate institutional support, curriculum challenges, and the emotional impacts this has on children. This analysis explores the insights shared by participants and highlights the systemic barriers faced by racialized students in the school system.

### **6.5.1 Theme 1: Experiences with Racism and School Responses**

Many participants highlighted the persistence of racism in schools, often manifesting as bullying, slurs, and exclusion.

- **Speaker 5** described how her son, who presents as neurotypical yet has autism, faced bullying that centered around racial slurs while playing basketball. This event profoundly affected her son's self-image, leading to negative self-talk and a noticeable change in his behavior – that is, became incredibly withdrawn. She also recalled an incident in which a stranger hurled racial insults at her and her child while crossing the street, forcing her to explain hateful language to her child at an early age. This shows the external, societal influences that perpetuate racism beyond school settings, yet impact children directly.
- **Speaker 1** shared her daughter's experience with bullying in middle school, where she was ostracized by her entire class, being called racial slurs and



nicknamed “poo.” Despite attempts to address the issue with the vice-principal, she felt dismissed and unsupported, which reinforced the systemic nature of racism within institutions. The school administration's indifference played a significant role in perpetuating this environment, contributing to her children's deteriorating sense of self-worth. The principal's comparison of his experiences as a white man in the Caribbean further exemplified the minimization of racialized students' struggles.

**Analysis:** These stories illustrate how institutional inaction and indifference exacerbate the impact of racist incidents, leaving parents and students left feeling unsupported. The lack of proactive responses from school staff reflects a deeper, systemic issue that normalizes and perpetuates racial discrimination in educational settings. The reluctance of school leaders to meaningfully engage with complaints of racism further alienates students and contributes to their diminished self-esteem.

### **6.5.2 Theme 2: Curriculum and Representation**

Discussions around the curriculum revealed concerns about the lack of inclusivity and the misrepresentation of BIPOC history.

- **Speaker 1** critiqued the linear curriculum that focused on memorization rather than critical thinking. She emphasized that it fails to involve parents in their children's education and does not allow students to revisit concepts, thereby limiting depth and critical analysis. Additionally, her daughter's experience with literature that portrayed slavery resulted in her peers treating her differently,

highlighting the harmful effects of a curriculum that reinforces negative racial stereotypes without context or support.

- **Speaker 5** noted that while there has been a push for Indigenous learning, Black history is still largely neglected in schools. As a result, she has had to teach her children about Black history herself.
- **Speaker 6** pointed out that when Black history is taught, it often focuses on negative experiences, such as slavery and oppression, without balancing it with narratives of Black joy and success.

**Analysis:** The curriculum's failure to inclusively represent BIPOC experiences contributes to the alienation of racialized students. Teaching history through a narrow lens that centers on negative experiences without offering empowering, rich, desire-based narratives reinforces deficit stereotypes that will inevitably impact how students view themselves and others. This imbalance in representation can deepen racial divides and create environments where racialized students are marginalized both academically and socially.

### **6.5.3 Theme 3: Impacts of Racism on Children's Emotional and Academic Well-being**

Parents consistently spoke about the emotional toll that racism takes on their children, affecting their confidence, mental health, and academic performance.

- **Speaker 5** shared how her son changed significantly after being bullied, leading him to require counseling. The emotional trauma he experienced was profound

enough to alter his behavior for a long period, only recently showing signs of improvement.

- **Speaker 1** described her daughter's attempt to fit in by changing her behavior. Though she found some refuge in a drama class, she was marginalized and ultimately denied a speaking role, despite being the only student of African descent in the class. This exclusion, along with a teacher's dismissive comment about her daughter's appearance, left her daughter doubting her abilities and self-worth. Over time, her daughter's academic performance suffered, and she gave up singing due to unrealistic expectations from a teacher.

**Analysis:** Racial discrimination in schools has a lasting impact on children's emotional and psychological well-being. Repeated incidents of exclusion and marginalization erode students' confidence and self-esteem, leading to disengagement from both academic and extracurricular activities. The fact that some parents chose to homeschool their children to protect them from racial trauma speaks to the failure of the school system to provide a safe and nurturing environment for BIPOC students. The systemic nature of these issues creates long-term emotional scars, limiting students' potential for personal growth and academic success.

#### **6.5.4 Theme 4: Parental Advocacy and the Role of Schools**

Parents stressed the importance of schools taking an active role in addressing racism and creating an inclusive environment.

- **Speaker 5** emphasized the need for written and enforced anti-racism policies. She also highlighted how her autistic son was expected to navigate complex

racial dynamics without proper support, placing undue pressure on a young child. The generational divide in racial experiences between her and her son further complicated the matter.

- **Speaker 4** emphasized that students need to feel safe and comfortable reporting incidents of racism, but often they do not.
- **Speaker 6** called for proper documentation and reporting mechanisms to ensure incidents of racism are not overlooked.

**Analysis:** Parents overwhelmingly agreed that schools need stronger, enforceable anti-racism policies. The current lack of clear protocols and accountability creates an environment where racist incidents go unchecked. Schools must be proactive in addressing racism by providing better training for staff, creating safe reporting systems for students, and involving parents in the process. Schools must also recognize that the emotional and psychological safety of BIPOC students is just as important as their physical safety.

## ***6.6 Solutions and Future Steps***

Parents offered various suggestions for improving inclusivity and addressing racism in schools.

- **Speaker 1** advocated for a curriculum that included more positive representation of African countries and Black inventors. She stressed the importance of changing the narrative around Black people to combat stereotypes.
- **Speaker 4** suggested that schools start with a mandate from day one to address racism, making it a part of school culture for both students and staff. This

approach would empower students by ensuring they are heard and supported from the start.

- **Speaker 2** highlighted the importance of using data and research to hold schools accountable and make the issue of racism less subjective.

**Analysis:** The solutions offered by parents reflect a desire for systemic change. Schools must go beyond reacting to individual incidents and instead embed anti-racism efforts into their culture, curriculum, and policies. By incorporating more inclusive and empowering narratives into the curriculum, and ensuring all staff and students are aware of what racism is, how it looks, and how to address it, schools can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment. Additionally, using data and research to track incidents and outcomes would provide an objective basis for further action.

Based on the findings to date, I suggest the following preliminary recommendations:

## **COMMUNICATION & ENGAGEMENT**

- Ministry should consult with racialized students and teachers on issues of racism in the education system.

## **CAPACITY-BUILDING & BRIDGING**

- Anti-racism training should be mandatory for all BC teachers, administrators, and staff.

## **IMPROVED OVERSIGHT, MONITORING & EVALUATION**

- Instances of racism and hate crimes should be tracked in schools.
- Teachers should be regularly evaluated on their performance, including their ability to deliver material in a culturally safe manner.

## **UPDATES TO THE CURRICULUM**

- BC secondary schools should focus on a competency-based curriculum and include more positive representatives of Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities.

## **7. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the research findings of this study, addressing the systemic issues of racism, inadequate support, and curriculum challenges in schools is crucial. Below are detailed recommendations for future actions, incorporating both data from the focus group and survey findings:

## ***1. Establish and Enforce Anti-Racist Policies***

The focus group emphasized the need for clear, written, and enforceable anti-racist policies. Many parents shared stories of racial harassment that were inadequately addressed by school administration, highlighting systemic barriers faced by racialized students and parents. Survey results also showed mixed satisfaction with how schools handle racist incidents, with only 17.07% of respondents being "significantly" satisfied with the schools' responses. Schools must develop comprehensive anti-racist policies that should be clearly communicated to students, staff, and parents, with specific protocols for reporting, investigating, and addressing incidents. The focus group revealed that many students feel unsupported when reporting racism, while the survey data showed a mixed satisfaction rate with how schools handle racist incidents. Establishing clear policies with follow-up mechanisms would improve student and parent trust in the school system and increase feelings of safety.

## ***2. Create Safe Reporting Mechanisms and Provide Support Resources***

Parents consistently raised concerns about the absence of safe spaces for students to report racism due to fears of inaction or even punishment. The findings indicated dissatisfaction with how racist incidents were handled, reflecting a need for more student-friendly, effective reporting and resolution systems. In the survey, 68.29% of students reported incidents of racial harassment, but dissatisfaction with how these reports were handled persisted. The lack of support contributes to the persistence of discriminatory behaviours in schools. Schools need to create a confidential and

accessible reporting system for students and parents to report racism or bullying. In addition to that, many schools are not equipped to provide the mental health support necessary for BIPOC students dealing with racial trauma. Providing mental health resources such as trauma-informed counselling and peer support networks is important for the well-being and success of students.

### ***3. Implement Mandatory Anti-Racist Training***

Parents expressed frustration with school staff's lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness of racism, particularly in the way incidents were minimized and dismissed. In the survey, a significant portion of students (31.71%) reported experiencing microaggressions often, which greatly impacted their sense of belonging. Anti-racist training for all teachers, administrators, and support staff would be helpful to adequately recognize, address, and prevent racism within school environments. Data from both the focus group and survey emphasized the harmful effects of institutional indifference to racism. Training staff to handle racist incidents with greater sensitivity can help reduce the emotional and psychological toll on students and their families. Focus of the training should be placed on recognizing both overt and covert racism, understanding implicit bias, and creating inclusive spaces for BIPOC students.

### ***4. Revise and Diversify the Curriculum***

The lack of inclusivity in the curriculum was a recurring issue, with parents noting that BIPOC students were either misrepresented or left out of educational content. The narrow focus on racial histories of oppression without centering and empowering narratives of Black excellence contributes to racial stereotypes and alienates students. Schools should revise curricula to include more positive representations of BIPOC



histories, cultures, and achievements. Examples include teaching about African countries, Black inventors, Indigenous knowledge systems, and the contributions of racial minorities across various fields. These narratives should be integrated across subjects to provide a holistic and empowering view of racial diversity.

### ***5. Involve Parents and Community Members in Decision-Making***

Many parents expressed the importance of being involved in their children's education and the development of school policies. Schools should seek greater engagement with parents and communities in addressing racism, ensuring that their voices are included in decision-making processes. Involving parents in a structured and meaningful way would ensure a stronger collective approach to combating racial discrimination in schools. Schools should establish parent advisory councils focused on diversity and inclusion, where parents, especially those from marginalized groups, can actively participate in discussions and policy-making regarding racism and discrimination. Regular meetings between parents, students, and school administrators would facilitate transparency and collaboration in addressing these issues.

### ***6. Use Data to Hold Schools Accountable***

As highlighted in the focus group and survey, using data to track incidents of racism and school responses is critical to making racism less subjective and more actionable. By monitoring trends and outcomes, schools can assess the effectiveness of their policies and interventions. Both the focus group and survey highlighted the need for greater accountability in addressing racism. Collecting and analyzing data would help identify systemic issues and ensure that schools are making measurable progress in creating a safer, more inclusive environment.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

By implementing these actions, schools can begin to address the systemic barriers identified by both parents and students, creating a more equitable and supportive educational environment for BIPOC students. Addressing these issues can foster a more inclusive, respectful, and supportive environment, benefitting not only students, but also their families and the broader social fabric. These changes, however, require a long-term commitment from educational institutions, policymakers, and communities alike.

For me, as a Black student and researcher, this project has been particularly empowering. It allowed me to give back to the community I come from by contributing to research that uplifts the voices of those who have been historically marginalized. Engaging with this work has deepened my commitment to social justice and reinforced for me the importance of creating lasting change in our educational institutions.

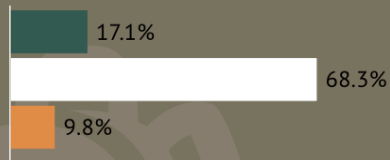
## Key Findings on Student Experiences of Racism and Belonging

### Experiencing Racism



31.7% of students often faced racial micro aggressions or harassment, with 14.6% experiencing them constantly. Racist remarks had a "moderate" effect on 29.3% of students' sense of belonging, a "significant" impact on 26.8%, and an "extreme" impact on 22%.

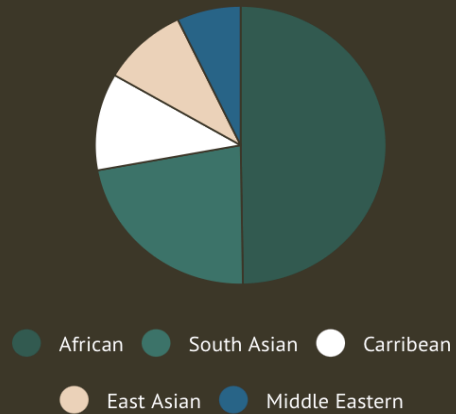
## Reporting Racism



68.3% of students reported racial harassment to school staff, but only 17.1% felt significantly satisfied with the response, while 9.8% were not satisfied at all.

## Identity and Experiences

The survey captured a diverse range of participants



## SENSE OF BELONGING

Belonging is the sense of being accepted, valued, and connected in a community. In schools, it means feeling safe, included, and respected by peers and staff. It's key to students' well-being, social growth, and academic success, fostering a positive attitude toward learning and engagement.

43.9% of students avoided areas like cafeterias, bathrooms, and buses due to safety concerns and discomfort

26.8% rarely felt a sense of belonging at school, and 12.2% never felt they belonged.

## Impact on Well-being



26.83%

Racism deeply affected students' emotional well-being, leading to less engagement in academics and extracurriculars



43.90%

Parents observed increased anxiety and social withdrawal in their children due to racism.

**"Belonging means  
feeling like I fit in with  
my peers and teachers,  
and that my cultural  
background is  
respected and valued."**

In response to the question *"What does belonging mean to you?"*

## In Summary

The survey highlights the negative impact of racism on students' well-being and belonging, with many frequently facing racial harassment and avoiding common spaces due to discomfort. This resulted in students' feelings of exclusion and disengagement from school life. To address these issues, schools should implement anti-racism training, establish safe and confidential reporting mechanisms, and promote open dialogue between students, parents, and staff. These measures can help create a more inclusive and supportive school environment, improving students' emotional well-being and engagement.

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## **APPENDIX**

### ***Appendix A: Focus Group Materials***

#### **Introduction**

The Anti-Racism in the Education System (ARIE) project is a key initiative developed by the Coastal Research, Education, & Advocacy Network (CREAN). CREAN is a community-focused organization dedicated to promoting social justice, equity, and inclusivity, particularly within education. Through the ARIE project, CREAN seeks to address how racialized students experience education and advocate for strong anti-racism initiatives in schools.

#### **Background on the ARIE Project**

The ARIE project aims to improve how racialized students experience education in British Columbia by focusing on their sense of belonging in school environments. This work aligns with CREAN's mission of using applied research and community engagement to drive meaningful change. Through surveys, workshops, and meetings, CREAN has been gathering insights to better understand how racism affects students' feelings of safety and inclusion in schools.

A 2021 survey at Victoria High School revealed that 42% of students felt unsafe or uncomfortable due to factors such as race, ethnicity, English-speaking ability, or cultural background. Additionally, 45% reported hearing racist remarks at school. These findings are critical to informing ARIE's advocacy and action.

#### **Challenges Identified**

One of the major challenges uncovered by the ARIE project is that many marginalized students feel unsafe at school due to their race, ethnicity, or cultural background. Underreporting of racist incidents makes it difficult to address these problems effectively. Many students express a lack of confidence in the current system, which points to the urgent need for a formalized and streamlined approach to addressing racism in schools.

For example, one student in the 2024 ARIE survey stated, "My experience in school has been truly horrible that I sometimes fear going to school. The teachers disregard my complaints most times and believe I overreact to certain situations." This demonstrates the need for reliable systems to address racism in education.

#### **Why Parental Involvement Matters**

Parents play a key role in shaping how their children navigate educational spaces, and their insights are critical in ensuring anti-racism policies are effective and responsive. The Parents Forum provides a platform for parents to voice their concerns

and contribute to the development of future policies directly affecting their children's school experiences.

### ***Appendix B: Focus Group Invitation Letter***

Dear Parents,

For racialized students, racism is an incessant experience — from hearing seemingly small microaggressions to witnessing overt acts of discrimination. We know that the spectrum of racial trauma shapes the lives of racialized students within the school structure, and it has the power to shape their life trajectories as well.

The ARIE project in British Columbia is a collaborative effort spanning from 2018 to 2023. Our mission is to investigate racism in public high schools, propose anti-racism initiatives, and advocate for better educational outcomes for racialized students.

We invite you to participate in a focus group discussion addressing several critical questions related to the experiences of BIPOC students. Your participation is crucial in helping us advocate for better circumstances for these students.

#### **Focus Group Topics**

- Experiences as Parents of BIPOC Students
- Handling Racist Incidents
- Curriculum and Proposed Changes
- Resources for BIPOC Students

### ***Appendix C: Focus Group Questions for Parents***

- **Tell us about your experiences as a parent of a BIPOC student.**
  - Prompt: Times your child was treated differently than non-BIPOC students.
  - Prompt: How supportive is your child's school of BIPOC students?
  - Prompt: Instances where your child felt unsafe due to their race.
- **Tell us about a time when your child dealt with a racist incident at school.**
  - Prompt: How was the incident handled? Was it handled properly?
- **Tell us about your opinions on the curriculum your child is taught.**
  - Prompt: Inclusivity of the curriculum, representation of BIPOC history.



- **How would you change the curriculum?**
  - Prompt: What subjects are more inclusive or need change?
- **Tell us about the resources at your child's school for BIPOC students.**
  - Prompt: Does the school have a Black Student Association? Is it valuable?
- **Can you share instances where your child felt included or excluded at school due to their race?**
  - Prompt: How did these experiences affect your child emotionally and academically?
- **What are your thoughts on the School Police Liaison Officer Program?**
- **How can we as a community support one another in addressing racism in schools?**
- **Is there anything else you would like to share or suggest?**

#### ***Appendix D: Focus Group Consent Form***

##### **Purpose of the Study**

This study investigates barriers that racialized students face in BC's education system. Based on current events, racialized students face barriers that white students do not, which makes this research essential.

##### **Participation Involves**

- Voluntary participation in a 90-minute focus group via video conference.
- The focus group will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy.
- Participation may cause discomfort when recalling personal experiences, and you are free to withdraw at any time.

##### **Risks and Benefits**

Participation may involve emotional discomfort but can provide insights valuable for educational reform. Participants may request a transcription of the discussion for review.

##### **Confidentiality and Data Security**

We will maintain confidentiality through pseudonyms and focus group notes will not include personal identifiers. Digital files will be securely stored for five years and

then destroyed. Findings will be published on CREAN's website and in open-access resources.

### ***Appendix E: Survey Questions for Students***

#### **Demographics:**

- Race, Religion, Sexual Orientation, Gender, Grade, Age, Region

#### **Belongingness:**

1. How often do you feel unsafe or uncomfortable at school?
2. How often do you feel a sense of belonging at school?
3. What does belonging mean to you?

#### **Experiences of Racism:**

4. How often do you hear racist statements from teachers?
5. How often do you witness racist behaviors from teachers or staff?
6. How do these experiences affect your sense of belonging?

#### **Harassment:**

7. Over the previous school year, how often did you experience physical harassment at school based on race or cultural background?
8. How often did you experience cyberbullying or verbal harassment?
9. How often did you encounter microaggressions?

#### **Reporting and Support:**

10. If you experienced harassment, did you report the incident to school staff?
11. Did you feel comfortable reporting it?
12. Did you receive adequate support from the school?

#### **Intervention and Education:**

13. How often do your peers intervene to promote inclusivity and address racism?
14. How does the inclusion of BIPOC history in the curriculum affect your sense of belonging?
15. Would peer support increase your sense of belonging? Why or why not?