Title of Research Project:

UNCOVERING BARRIERS AND IDENTIFYING PATHWAYS TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN YOUTH IN OTTAWA

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Abstract

“Uncovering Barriers and Identifying Pathways to Educational Success” is a community-based exploratory research project that was undertaken by a group of Master of Social Work Students from Carleton University. Research was completed in collaboration with Jaku Konbit, a community-based, African Caribbean-centered organization providing cultural and educational programs to youth in Ottawa, Ontario. The purpose of this study was twofold: to identify the educational barriers faced in the school system by youth of African and Caribbean descent, specifically in the areas of Math, Science and English, and to identify strategies for their educational success. The methodology involved qualitative, open-ended, semi-structured focus groups. Two focus groups, involving creative activities, were held with youth from 16-19 years of age who self-identified as being of African or Caribbean descent. A third focus group was conducted with teachers/administrators who work within the educational system with the targeted youth population. Each focus group consisted of a maximum of 10 participants. After each focus group a brief follow up survey was sent via email, to all interested participants, providing them with the opportunity to report any information they may not have felt comfortable sharing during the focus group, or anything that they might have thought of since attending. This study resulted in the identification of several key barriers and strategies for success. Identified barriers were divided into three main themes: Systemic anti-Black factors, environmental influences on educational success, and perceptions/experiences of racial
discrimination. Strategies for success were divided into two main themes: Strategies to address systems and environmental barriers and strategies to help individual students succeed.

**Introduction**

“Uncovering Barriers and Identifying Pathways to Educational Success” is a community-based exploratory research project that was completed by a group of Master of Social Work students at Carleton University. Research was completed in collaboration with Jaku Konbit, a community-based, African Caribbean-centered organization providing cultural and educational programs to youth in Ottawa, Ontario. This research project sought to answer the following research questions: What are the barriers that may prevent African and Caribbean youth from succeeding in the areas of Math, Science, and English, and what are the pathways that may lead to their educational success? The study focused specifically on youth of African and Caribbean descent in Ottawa, Ontario. In order to obtain this information, youth of African and Caribbean descent, from 16-19 years of age, and teachers/administrators who work with this target population were invited to participate in the study. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach. This was important as it was necessary for the youth and teachers/administrators to have the opportunity to express, in their own words, what they consider to be the barriers faced by youth of African and Caribbean and the potential pathways that can lead to their success, as they are the only ones who can speak to their experiences. It is Jaku Konbit’s aim to develop more programming, based on the results of this research, which is strengths based, such as creating a tutoring program that assists youth to achieve their goals within the school system.

Each individual, group and/or community defines the terms ‘barriers’ and ‘success in education’ differently. This research enabled participants to determine what these terms meant
to them, so as not to impose certain definitions onto the participants, potentially restricting the information shared. The goal was for the participants to express what they understood to be barriers and pathways to success. For the purpose of uniformity however, these definitions were decided upon among the research team to ensure all had a shared understanding of the definitions of ‘barriers’ and ‘success in education.’ This was important to ensure that analysis was consistent. The research team defined ‘barriers’ as obstacles or challenges that get in the way of you performing to your full capacity. They are things that make it difficult for you to perform well in school. The research team defined ‘success in education” as having a feeling that you have been able to do your best in school. It is the idea that you understand your teachers and the subjects that you are taking, that you feel good about school and the work that you produce. It was understood among the research team that barriers and pathways to educational success could be identified by the participants in any form and at any level, as long as they were considered barriers or pathways to the participant.

Identifying the pathways to success, rather than just the barriers faced by the target youth population, was completed with the aim of shedding positive light on the success of youth of African and Caribbean descent. Research, and general society, tends to often focus solely on the barriers faced by these youth and the negative experiences brought about as a result of these barriers. In this way, this research project is unique, with a balanced focus on both barriers and strategies for success.

This research topic has great relevance to the field of social work. Social work practice in itself seeks to help marginalized and oppressed individuals, groups, and communities overcome barriers they face, with the goal of greater equality for all people. It strives to seek justice for those who are affected by the way in which society is structured. Based on this, and
the goals of Jaku Konbit, it was determined that Structural Social Work theory would be used as
the guide for the research. This helped to solidify the research questions and methodology.

Structural Social Work theory, and practice, places “the focus for change (on) mainly...the
structures of society and not solely on the individual” (Mullaly, 1997, p.104). Structural Social
Work theory therefore sees social problems as resulting from the social context as opposed to the
failings of the individual (Mullaly, 1997). It is understood that problems are often inherent in
social institutions, based on “the way that they discriminate against people along the lines of
class, gender, race, sexual orientation, disability and so on” (Mullaly, 1997, p.104).

Therefore, it was assumed that the barriers to educational success faced by youth of
African and Caribbean descent are not solely individual but rather that they also result from how
society is organized. Since Structural Social Work is founded in critical theory, it was important
that not only barriers be addressed, but also strategies for success, as critical theory is interested
“in the emancipation of those who are oppressed” (Mullaly, 1997, p.108). With this
understanding, the research was undertaken with the hope that strategies could be identified that
could be used to benefit not only individuals but also society as a whole. Structural Social Work
theory was used as a framework to guide analysis of the research data, ensuring that individual
and structural levels were considered concurrently and that intersections were identified by the
research team.

The underlying assumption of this research is that the educational system should be
equally accessible for all people, so as to provide the necessary tools that people need to achieve
success at all levels of their education, and stages of their lives. The implications of this research
for social work practice are very important. If these issues are not identified and addressed,
society will continue to have generations of African and Caribbean youth who feel disengaged
and disenfranchised within the education system, and subsequently society as a whole. Therefore, to get to the root cause of why students feel they are unable to achieve success at school, particularly in the areas of Math, Science, and English, would create opportunities for empowered youth and their allies to go back into their communities and advocate for the necessary services and programs needed to ensure these youth are participating at the same level as the rest of their peers. When structural problems are addressed, we will begin to see more healthy, balanced, active, and successful communities.

**Literature Review**

In 2006, the population of Ottawa-Gatineau reached 1.13 million. According to census 2001 data, there were 168,120 immigrants in Ottawa, and Blacks alone made up 34,645 people. The Black population in Ottawa is relatively younger when compared to all visible minority groups. Most are either children or youth, below 25 years of age, and are immigrants from the African continent or from the Caribbean. A significant number arrive when they are between 5-12 years old. Blacks also have the highest percentage of persons attending school on a full time basis when compared to all visible minority groups (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Social scientists have been researching the problems Black youth have been facing in urban areas throughout Canada since the 1970’s (Gibbs, 1996). The introduction of federal multiculturalism policy in 1971 “formed the basis for multicultural education policies and programs initiated by school boards across Canada” (James, 2005, p.97). These policies and practices have the goal of “responding to the needs, expectations, interests and aspirations of their diverse student bodies” (James, 2005, p.93). However, many barriers continue to be identified, specifically for youth of African and Caribbean descent.
There have been many studies focusing on the barriers faced by youth of African and Caribbean descent in the school system. Results from several studies will be considered here, along with additional information from secondary sources. Gibbs (1996), using a qualitative approach, conducted 8 semi-structured focus groups and 24 individual interviews with African-Caribbean women, between the ages of 15 to 24, in order to obtain information on education and employment for this population in Toronto, Canada and London, England. Quantitative data collection was also completed to gain statistical information on this group. The women were recruited through community institutions/agencies that serve African and Caribbean populations in Toronto and London (Gibbs, 1996). Gibbs (1996) found that “young African-Caribbean’s continue to face barriers of full acceptance and incorporation into Canadian ...society” (p.153).

Codjoe (2001) researched the educational experiences, including barriers and the “factors underlying (the) successful educational attainment” of African-Canadian youth in Edmonton, Alberta (p.345). These youth were students attending the University of Alberta and they reflected on their experiences in primary and secondary schooling. For this study 12 academically “successful” Black students, who had an awareness of the educational issues faced by many Black students, were selected. A qualitative research approach was used, including in-depth, open-ended, personal and focus group interviews. Secondary sources were also reviewed (Codjoe, 2001).

Dei (1995) used qualitative in-depth interviews to gain information about the experiences, within the Ontario public school system, of Black youth and school dropouts. The project included interviews with school teachers/administrators, Black youth, parents, guardians, and community groups. Non-black youth were also interviewed for cross-referencing purposes (Dei, 1995).
Results from numerous studies have highlighted issues that Codjoe (2001) refers to as “racialized barriers” (p.348). These “racialized barriers” have been divided into different categories by many researchers. For the purpose of this review, Codjoe’s (2001) categories will be utilized to present research findings from the literature. He refers to 5 key barriers, including: Anti-Black racism, negative racial stereotyping, racially-biased curriculum/texts, low teacher expectations, and an alienating school environment (Codjoe, 2001).

*Anti-Black racism* is inclusive of both prejudice and discrimination. Students in Codjoe’s (2001) study all reported having encountered some form of racism, both inside and outside school. This includes racism and discrimination by teachers, administrators, coaches, school staff, and peers, and was overt and/or covert in nature. Research has indicated that students report experiencing name-calling, racial hostility, and racial slurs (Codjoe, 2001; Gibbs, 1996; Henry, 1999). Codjoe (2001) found systemic racism to be “a significant barrier that stands in the way of Black academic achievement” (p.343). This was also reported by Henry (1999). This form of racism exists when the dominant culture places its rules on people of diverse backgrounds “in the name of integration” (Codjoe, 2001, p.344).

*Negative racial stereotyping* perpetuates the stigma attached to Black youth. Stereotyping is often reported as being maintained within the school by those with whom students interact, including teachers. Youth have been found to have particular concern about the perception of Black students in the larger society, which is greatly perpetuated by the media (Codjoe, 2001; Gibbs, 1996). Streaming is one form of stereotyping often identified (Codjoe, 2001; Gibbs, 1996; James, 2005). Gibbs (1996) found that students were often assigned to low level schools and special education programs, such as ESL classes, often without being properly assessed. This has been linked to school withdrawal, school failure and low academic
achievement (Dei, 1995; Gibbs, 1996). Black students are often streamed into basic and general levels of education, as well as vocational programs and athletic activities (Codjoe, 2001). Gibbs (1996) found that youth reported “perceiving that they received differential treatment as compared to Whites, males, and native-born students” (p. 147). Students reported often being discouraged from taking advanced level courses and also from applying to post-secondary education and pursuing professional careers. Youth reported that they often received praise for their performance and athletic abilities while they were rarely recognized for their academic achievements (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1995; Gibbs, 1996). This was reported as perpetuating the perception that all Blacks are good athletes (Codjoe, 2001).

Codjoe (2001) reported that one of the primary myths is that Blacks are genetically inferior, which is reinforced by beliefs of the public, as well as educators. It is believed that school failure is related to inferior intelligence and students’ own inadequacies and problems (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1995; Henry, 1999; Wolfgang, 1975). This particularly relates to the expectation that Black students are not good in school, specifically in Math, Science, and English (Codjoe, 2001). This stereotype is further enforced by the focus in literature on the underachievement and failure of Black youth in the education system, and also when students do poorly on tests and assignments due to cultural implications (Codjoe, 2001; Wolfgang, 1975). There are “assumptions of separate radicalized groups possessing distinct mental and physical abilities” (Codjoe, 2001, p. 354). Black students also reported often being labelled as “loud, rude, and dishonest” (Gibbs, 1996, p. 148). Stereotyping by teachers has been considered an ‘environmental stressor’ often linked to reduced willingness of Black students to persist at academic tasks, and to interfering with cognitive processes involved with learning (Codjoe, 2001, p. 361).
**Racially-biased curriculum** is of great concern as curriculum does not reflect Black history, perspectives, experiences, or contributions to Canadian society (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1995; Gibbs, 1996; Henry, 1999; James, 2005). Racial biases have also been identified in curriculum, along with ethnocentrism in courses and texts (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1995; Henry, 1999). “Textbooks tend to present the perspectives of White, upper-class, Anglo-and French-Canadian males...many textbooks do not acknowledge African Canadians as active participants in the shaping of our nation’s history” (Codjoe, 2001, p.364). This can create isolation and a decreased sense of belonging for Black youth (Codjoe, 2001).

**Low teacher expectations** include differential treatment by teachers with regard to grading, discipline, and classroom interaction. Black students have reported lack of encouragement and insensitivity from teachers, as well as teachers doubting their academic ability, as addressed above (Codjoe, 2001; Gibbs, 1996). “There is a growing body of research and evidence to suggest that a teacher’s expectations, encouragement, attitudes, and evaluations primarily influence students’ perceptions of themselves as learners, and that a student’s social class, race or ethnicity is a major determinant of teacher expectations” (Codjoe, 2001, p. 358). This can create the phenomenon where “some Black students perform poorly in school because they buy into the stereotype that they cannot compete academically with White students” (Codjoe, 2001, p. 363). This can also lead to self-doubt and avoidance of academic competition (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1995).

**An alienating school environment** can lead to social isolation, exclusion, and loneliness. This is perpetuated when there are limited Black students in a predominantly White school, and by a lack of Black role models such as teachers, administrators, and counsellors within the school system. This may lead to students having limited access to individuals who understand
their backgrounds and experiences and people whom these youth can look up to (Codjoe, 2001; Gibbs, 1996; Henry, 1999; James, 2005). “It is important that schools reflect the community’s composition, as well as provide positive role models for all students” (Codjoe, 2001, p.369). Henry (1999) discusses that alienation has resulted in the creation of youth subcultures formed by youth within the school system for “cultural distinction and identity,” which are in turn often banned and considered to be militant (p.124).

Additional factors have also been identified as barriers. One of these factors is “cultural conflict” (Wolfgang, 1975). This refers to issues such as adjustment to the English language, lack of social support and community resources catering to the specific needs of this population, high likelihood of residing in areas of poverty with others who are disadvantaged, adjustment to urban life as well as new norms and values (Henry, 1999; Yee, J., Johns, C., Tam, S., & Apputhurai-Paul, N., 2003). Henry (1999) noted “stresses and strains” which are associated with the separation and reunion of children with their parent(s) when parent(s) move to Canada to settle prior to having their children join them (Henry, 1999, p.123). Children often have to “rediscover” their parents (Henry, 1999, p.123). Henry (1999) also speaks to challenges created, specifically for students from the Caribbean, by the less structured and disciplined education system in Canada, as well as different teaching, testing, and learning styles. For example, a tendency for students to remain quiet in Caribbean culture is often deemed defiant and ignorant in Canada. Due to cultural differences, in respect to dealing with educational challenges, issues often do not get addressed (Henry, 1999). Yee et al. (2003) speaks to stress caused by acculturation such as high parental expectations for academic achievement. Upward mobility for these youth often means abandoning their ethnicity to assimilate with the dominant culture (Wolfgang, 1975).
Codjoe (2001) indicated that “studies rarely document and investigate the successful educational experiences of Black students in North America. The tendency...is to emphasise the poor academic performance of Black students” (p.345). Codjoe (2001) does identify parental support, student motivation, and cultural self education as a means to defy stereotypes and achieve success in studies.

A study by Rhamie and Hallam (2002) did undertake research to attempt to “establish what might promote success” for African-Caribbean children in the UK. They did this through qualitative, semi-structured, interviews with individuals between the ages of 23-40 who recounted what had led to their success. Four primary categories were established to present the factors leading to success, including: individuals (self-motivation, focus, disciple, and determination; confidence; awareness; talent; etc.); home (parental support, encouragement, guidance and expectations; relational role models and mentors; etc.); community (church; community projects and cultural activities; role models and mentors; etc.); and school (supportive and encouraging teachers; positive school atmosphere; extra-curricular activities; etc.) (Rhamie & Hallam, 2002).

**Methodology**

This research project, “Uncovering Barriers and Identifying Pathways to Educational Success,” was a qualitative research study. The selection of the qualitative approach was based on the exploratory nature of the research and the need to interpret meaning from information embedded in a cultural context (Brun, 2005). As the literature review indicates, the educational barriers and the factors that lead to the success of students of African and Caribbean descent are diverse, multiple and complex. They are perceived and constructed by youth and teachers/administrators in different ways, based on their experiences and knowledge. This was
reinforced through the current research study where information came from the realities of the youth of African and Caribbean descent and the teachers/administrators who work with them. Based on this, the information to be collected was better suited to a qualitative methodology.

Participation criteria for youth participants was self identification as being of African or Caribbean descent, between the ages of 16-19 years old, and for teachers/administrators was identification as working within the education system with the target youth population. Potential research participants were identified and recruited through Jaku Konbit’s networks. Promotion for the research project began at the Kwanza celebration, a large annual cultural event, at the end of December 2007. A research poster was designed by a youth of African descent and began to be distributed through Jaku Konbit’s networks after the Kwanza celebration. This was done alongside word of mouth promotion of the research by the agency.

Focus groups were used for the qualitative data collection, including 2 for youth of African and Caribbean descent and 1 for teachers/administrators. Registration for the focus groups was organized by Jaku Konbit. A maximum of 10 participants could register for each focus group. In total, 8 youth and 8 teachers/administrators participated. Focus groups were used in the hopes that group interaction would stimulate discussions and produce rich information that can only come from the immediate comparison, contrast and confirmation of ideas that arise from dialogue in a group setting.

All focus group sessions were held at the Bronson Centre (211 Bronson Ave.) in Ottawa. The two youth focus groups lasted 1.5 – 2 hours each, whereas the focus group for teachers/administrators lasted approximately 2.5 hours. The composition of the focus groups varied however there were a few more females than males in attendance at each focus group. The teacher/administrator focus group consisted entirely of participants of African and
Caribbean descent, even though this was not a set criterion for participation in this particular focus group. The focus groups for youth were conducted on January 26, 2008 and February 9, 2008. The teacher/administrator focus group was conducted on February 16, 2008.

In attempts to elicit detailed and in-depth descriptions of the experiences of participants, open-ended interview questions were used. The focus groups for the youth involved three workshop style activities which required discussion in both small and large groups. These activities promoted dialogue and brought forth unique information that may not have been elicited in the more traditional focus group setting. After each small group activity, a large group discussion was facilitated by the researchers in order to discuss what educational barriers and factors which may lead to educational success, particularly in the areas of Math, Science, and English, were identified through the small group activities. All large group discussions were recorded on flip chart paper, and researchers also took notes while observing both the small and large group activities.

In the teacher/administrator focus group session, seven open-ended, semi-structured, questions were asked. These questions provided the opportunity for teachers/administrators to share, based on their experiences, what they understood to be the barriers to educational success, as well as the pathways to educational success, for youth of African and Caribbean descent. After each of the 3 focus groups a brief follow up survey was sent out via email, to all interested participants, providing them with the opportunity to report any information they may not have felt comfortable sharing during the focus group, or anything that they might have thought of since attending the group. This survey also gave participants the chance to let the researchers know what they thought about the focus group and the research study as a whole. Only 2 surveys were returned.
Since transportation could have been a potential barrier or deterrent for some of the youth participants, bus tickets were provided at the end of each focus group if needed. Pizza was also served to participants of the youth focus groups. Transportation for teachers/administrators was not covered. There were no other forms of compensation for participation in the research.

The research findings were generated from qualitative content analysis of the information collected in the focus groups. After completion of all of the focus groups, the observation notes, flipchart notes and collage data was compiled on flip chart paper by the researchers and typed into an MS Word document. Youth and teacher/administrator data was kept separate at this stage. The participants' statements were reviewed several times by the researchers and meaning units were identified (Tutty et al., 1996). From these units the researchers separated similar data into categories, continuing to keep youth and teacher/administrator data separate. This process resulted in 16 categories for the youth data and 19 categories for the teacher/administrator data. All 35 categories were then reviewed together, at length, in order to identify patterns in the hopes of determining several key themes. All stages of the analysis process were completed together by the research team at group meetings. All decisions were made by consensus when possible. When consensus could not be achieved after lengthy discussion, voting by majority rule was used as a last resort.

**Strategies for Achieving Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is an essential component of qualitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness in qualitative research is the extent to which one can believe in the accuracy of the research findings; that results truly represent “the realities as intended by the evaluation participants” (Brun, 2005, p.215). Primary to achieving trustworthiness in this study was ensuring the credibility of the data collection methods used, “according to the most widely
accepted procedures cited in the research and evaluation literature” (Brun, 2005, p.213). Brun (2005) states, “the results of evaluations that employ credible qualitative approaches reduce threats to the trustworthiness of the data” (p.123). Based on the thorough literature review completed prior to beginning this research project, which consistently evidenced the use of qualitative, open-ended, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, it seems apparent that the research methodology employed in this study is credible, therefore increasing the likelihood of achieving trustworthiness.

One key strategy used to achieve trustworthiness in this research study was reflexive journal writing. Reflexivity involves self-awareness and ‘critical self-reflection’ by the researchers, with regard to potential biases, to better guard against biases influencing the collection and analysis of data (Fook, White, & Gardner, 2006). Throughout this study, each researcher completed two reflexive papers. This enabled more continuous reflection on all aspects of the research process.

All of the researchers involved in this study were passionate about the project and exercised dedication and professional commitment to the research. There was continual communication amongst the research team and regular meetings were held throughout the project. All analysis was done as a group to better ensure consistency and the integrity of the data throughout the analysis process.
Results/Discussion

Barriers to Educational Success

Table 1: Summary of Results – Barriers for Educational Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>What are the barriers that may prevent African and Caribbean youth from succeeding in the areas of Math, Science, and English?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Themes</td>
<td>Systemic Anti-Black Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environmental Influences on Educational Success</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceptions/Experience of Racial Discrimination</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sub-Themes</td>
<td>System causing teachers’ disempowerment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of Black teachers to act as role-models</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Student curriculum and, teacher training are problematic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African and Caribbean students are not represented in Math and Science classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social factors - Family, parents, teachers, poverty, language factors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pressure to /not to belong to a social group</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of positive media representation</td>
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<td>Stereotyping/Labelling</td>
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<td>Racism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Belonging</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Low expectations of students’ abilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Systemic Anti-Black Factors**

The “system,” referring to the structure of the school system, was explicitly identified by teachers/administrators as the “root” of the problems faced by youth of African and Caribbean descent. Teachers/administrators referred to ‘working in a system that contains you’ and to “always hitting brick walls.” One teacher/administrator eloquently expressed systematic challenges by questioning “how do I deal (with the system) and still be effective, when all roads
lead to ineffective?” It was stated that teachers/administrators “pull things together but the system pulls them apart.” The key challenge identified by the teachers/administrators was teachers’ inability to “reach kids.” The system creates a barrier to developing a relationship between teachers/administrators and students of African and Caribbean descent, a relationship that is necessary to foster a sense belonging and trust. It was stated that “rules without relationship equals rebellion.” Not only was relationship building important between teachers/administrators and students of African and Caribbean descent, but also between teachers/administrators and the parents of youth of African and Caribbean descent.

Lack of Black role models within the school system, specifically Black teachers/administrators, was identified as a key barrier to this relationship building. One teacher/administrator stated “we don’t have enough role models in our schools” and another raised a more specific concern by stating that “we (also) need (more) Black French teachers.” One teacher, when referring to parents of students of African and Caribbean descent, stated that she knows “one barrier (is) gone....when they see me they trust me.” This teacher also stated that “it’s all about them feeling normal and welcome....I’m also acting as a role model and mentor for them.” “Misunderstanding between teachers, parents and kids...especially with newcomers,” primarily caused by a lack of communication, was identified as one factor that can better be addressed if relationships are built. Research has identified that social isolation, exclusion and loneliness is prevalent in school environments, for youth of African and Caribbean descent, due to a lack of Black role models, such as teachers, administrators and counsellors. These effects have especially been attributed to Black students’ experiences in predominantly White schools (Codjoe, 2001; Gibbs, 1996; Henry, 1999; James, 2005). One youth participant identified this
factor during one of the focus groups by reporting feeling a sense of disentitlement when enrolled in a primarily ‘White school;’ ‘I do not feel I can ask questions.’

Another factor identified as affecting relationship building, specifically between teachers/administrators and students of African and Caribbean descent, was teacher training. This was indicated by a teacher who rhetorically questioned, ‘how are teachers able to relate when they’re taught one way to teach?’ It was stated that ‘every student has intelligence, has a way of learning’ and that ‘teachers are hindered by curriculum format that does not integrate alternative means of teaching’ to address diverse learning styles. One teacher/administrator contextualized this sentiment by stating that “programs that work in one setting don’t always work in every setting,” but rather need to be adapted to meet the needs of the specific population being served.

Another under-addressed curriculum issue identified by teachers/administrators, which can create adverse effects for youth of African and Caribbean descent and can hinder teachers, was the lack of a ‘diverse curriculum’ with focus on African history. One teacher stated, “all kids need to know about African History, it’s all our history.” Several researchers have identified that curriculum in the Canadian school system does not reflect Black history, including Black perspectives, experiences, and contributions (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1995; Gibbs, 1996; Henry, 1999; James, 2005).

History however was not the only subject addressed as an issue for youth of African and Caribbean descent. Both youth participants and teachers/administrators identified that lack of representation of students of African and Caribbean descent in Math and Science classes is a concern. A Grade 12 student stated that he has “not seen (Black students) taking Math or Science.” The statement of one teacher reinforced this; “in my math class I was the only (Black)
One and I was the teacher.” One potential factor causing this lack of representation was expressed by a math teacher who stated that he “find(s) the basis (is) not there.... (students of African and Caribbean descent) have been put through the system even when they are having difficulties.” Research by Codjoe (2001) and Gibbs (1996) supports the notion of being “put through the system” by reporting that Black students are often assigned to special education programs and streamed into basic and general levels of education, such as vocational programs.

**Environmental Influences on Educational Success**

The environmental context of learning has major impacts on educational success for African and Caribbean youth. Environmental factors referred to in the study, which were identified as influencing the educational success of youth of African and Caribbean descent, include many critical social factors such as personal and academic support, social pressures related to identity, belonging, and social categorization on the basis of who one is. In addition, youth spoke about the critical problem of media misrepresentation of Black people. This issue was explained as being exacerbated by a lack of Black role models among teachers/administrators. Youth expressed feelings of helplessness and defeat regarding their perceived negative representation and lack of positive role models, specifically from Black teachers, who have the potential to counteract the impacts of the negative portrayal of Blacks in the media.

In addition to negative media portrayal of Blacks, lack of “support” from different sources, such as family, parents and teachers, was also seen to have a significant impact on student educational success. The main reasons mentioned, with regard to the lack of “support,” included poverty, language difficulties for parents who are new to Canada, lack of parental involvement in students’ learning, or simply because parents are absent in the lives of youth — the reason why parents are absent was not pursued in this study. The importance of family
and/or parental support was summarized as follows: “When I look at the students who are doing really well they all have something in common. They are all involved. …They all have really involved parents… Those who function at a lower level have the potential but, they also have a lot of other factors against them.” This response provides support to why youth who lack this necessary family and parental support for learning may also have no motivation to even try to succeed in school. Henry (1999) and Yee et al. (2003) have also indicated many of these environmental factors, such as adjustment to the English language, residing in poverty stricken areas, and lack of a strong support system as barriers to the educational success of Black youth.

Another source of support identified by youth participants as lacking, and yet important, includes support received from teachers within the school environment. They indicated that if teachers are supportive it can motivate them to be more involved in learning, particularly in the subjects of English, Math and Science. Lack of teacher support is further affected by cultural and religious factors, seen by youth as affecting relationships with teachers. Some teachers are seen as not understanding or not being supportive of different religious and cultural practices. Therefore, the key environmental influence identified as a barrier to the educational success of youth of African and Caribbean descent is support - family and/or parental, as well as from teachers. This is verified by Rhamie and Hallam (2002) who reported that both parental support and supportive and encouraging teachers are factors that have been identified as leading to the success of youth of African and Caribbean descent.
Perceptions/Experience of Racial Discrimination

It is becoming increasingly evident that youth of African and Caribbean descent experience one of the highest school-drop-out rates in the country. Many factors have been attributed to this problem, but experiences of racial discrimination within school systems have been cited as a major cause. This claim is consistent with findings in the literature review where Codjoe (2001) referred to racial stereotypical views that perpetuate stigma attached to Black youth. The youth of African and Caribbean descent in the current study expressed their discomfort of being portrayed in a negative manner, such as being gang members, due to their specific attire or their interaction/assembly with other Black youth. The youth also reported that positive actions or accomplishments, such as academic success and prominent roles within society, are rarely attributed to Black people, unless they are for ‘non-academic’ activities such as sports. This was also echoed by Gibbs (1996), Dei (1995), and Codjoe (2001).

Another barrier the youth of African and Caribbean descent identified was racism. Youth participants reported that while patience is exercised in the classroom, with clear explanations, for White youth, Black youth are not afforded the same treatment. The literature collaborates the finding that some teachers/administrators are guilty of racist comments and that at times teaching practices differ based on race (Codjoe, 2001; Gibbs, 1996). This biased approach to teaching Black youth was also indicated as being present when teachers have low expectations of Black youth, but the opposite expectations for White youth. Teacher expectations were expressed as being vital to the success or failure of youth of African and Caribbean descent in school, based on the idea that “low expectation = low output.” A fourth barrier highlighted by the youth participants was a lack of belonging they feel within the school system and likewise in the general population. The youth described this lack of belonging as a lack of acceptance of who
they are and what they represent; a lack of social connection because they do not fully integrate within the school system and society. Rather, they feel segregated from Whites. Codjoe (2001) indicated that an alienating school environment, which can surely be generalized to larger society, can cause social isolation, exclusion, and loneliness, all of which are not conducive to feeling a sense of belonging. An environment of oppression is being constructed where “you don’t have the freedom to be proud of who you are,” thereby hindering Black youth from expressing themselves and achieving success.

**Strategies for Educational Success**

*Table 2: Summary of Results – Strategies for Educational Success*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>What are the pathways that may lead to educational success for youth of African and Caribbean descent?</th>
<th>Strategies for Helping Individual Students Succeed:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Themes</strong></td>
<td>Strategies to Address System-Based and Environmental Barriers:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-Theme</strong></td>
<td>School System:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Greater connection to the community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Decreased power relations with teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Increased support for students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Make curriculum more diverse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Youth represented in the curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Taught to all learning styles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What can the student do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Be focused, set goals for success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Do not let being ‘Black’ stand in your way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Believe in yourself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What can Teachers do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Build relationships with students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Be involved and supportive</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Be a Role Model</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>-Must aim to capture the attention of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Teachers of colour must be visible and active</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Education:</td>
<td>What can Parents do:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Greater sensitivity, diversity and cultural training</td>
<td>- Parents should be assisted to become involved in their child’s education</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Continue training beyond teachers’ college education</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Strategies to address System-based and Environmental Barriers**

The literature review offered little about strategies or larger systemic changes that need to occur in order to remove educational barriers for youth of African and Caribbean descent. The following strategies, identified by research participants, could be seen however as addressing two of the four factors for success that Rhamie and Hallam (2002) identified; community and school. In the current research study, linking school and community, through outreach, was seen as important to create opportunities for engaging youth and parents. It was reported that currently this school and community relationship is weak, as such; newcomer parents, for example, are less engaged in the school, and in the education of their children. For this school and community relationship to happen, a “decrease in power relationships on all levels” is needed. This was echoed in the participants’ call for school “outreach” to create a connection with the community.

“Curriculum” was the second structural problem identified as needing to be addressed to remove barriers that youth of African and Caribbean descent face. The data collected gave strength to the issues identified in the literature review under Codjoe’s (2001) category of racially-biased curriculum. The data from the current research study suggested that the school board curriculum does not reflect the diversity of the school population. This problem was echoed by many of the participants, highlighting that Black history should not be kept within the confines of a one-month educational event, but rather be integrated into the school curriculum - “all kids need to know about African History, it’s all our history.” Youth spoke of the need to
see their own faces represented within the subject matter that they are taught so that they can become engaged and motivated to do well. Both the teachers and the youth reported that the curriculum that is being taught needs to be adjusted in order to adopt it to different learning styles. The teachers stated that, ‘this is not something that should be left for the teachers to do themselves; rather, it should be reflected within the objectives and requirements of the school boards of education.’ ‘Every student has intelligence and a way of learning, and, the curriculum should be able to allow teachers to find a way to connect with their students and what they need to teach them.’ Diversity needs to be taught to be celebrated within the class; “two different races working together.” There was a consensus that there is a need for the creation of diverse curriculum to be taught within the schools.

The last larger structure that was identified as needing to change in order to remove the barriers that youth of African and Caribbean descent encounter in the school system was teacher’s education. Many of the teachers who attended the focus group identified the need for more diversity, sensitivity and cultural training for the teachers themselves. It was a common feeling that many of the teachers who are working with African and Caribbean youth do not know about the issues that affect them and that this needs to change. There was the feeling that teachers are not schooled enough to reach the youth and that if teachers cannot do this then goals of the youth fall apart. Another aspect that was presented, to be addressed within the education of teachers, was a feeling that many White teachers mean well but are unaware that they can be barriers to the African and Caribbean youth that they teach. It was reported that there needs to be an aspect of self awareness and bias identification within the education that teachers receive. This is very important when “racism is one of the major causes of dismissals and suspensions of Black youth from school” (Codjoe, 2001, p.361). Along with this, there is a need for re-
education of those teachers, principals and other administrators now working in the field in order to better serve their students, rather than set them up for failure.

The education of teachers cannot stop after they finish a year of teachers college, but should be ongoing while they are teaching, especially for those who work within schools that are made up of diverse populations. Statements such as; ‘teachers skilled in diversity teaching should teach other teachers,’ and it’s “very important for educators to be teachers of other teachers,” helped strengthen the argument for further training for teachers once they are out of teachers college and in the field.

The last change that needs to happen within teacher’s education, which the teachers identified, is one that deals with the low number of Black teachers in the schools. One participant emphasized the need for more Black French teachers. This comes down to restructuring the process used to recruit people into teachers college, as well as the practices that are followed for accepting those that apply. One teacher expressed the need to have more consideration given to life skills, experience and practical knowledge when accepting people into teachers college, rather than just their academic marks. It was argued that this will help to make Black teachers more visible within the schools, creating more role models for youth of African and Caribbean descent to help capture, inspire and motivate them to do well.

**Strategies for Helping Individual Students Succeed**

Getting involved through active participation in the educational process was identified by participants as a positive factor for educational success. Both teachers/administrators and students expressed that if a student of African and Caribbean descent wants to succeed they have to “push” to make things work for them. This was evidenced by one student who reported an undertaking by a group of students at one particular school where they wanted to honour Black
History Month by staging a Black History Month celebration. The project was introduced by a non-Black youth who was seen as an advocate for the Black youth. Together, the youth were able to accomplish their vision of having Black History Month at the school - “Now we have Black History Month assembly and Black History Week.” Participants expressed that students need to “stand up for what (they) believe and know to be true, to stand” and “set goals.” Others mentioned that it is important that if students want “to reach (their) goals (they) have to have a plan.”

Teachers play a critical role in the lives of their students. Research studies have indicated that low teacher expectations contribute to students’ poor achievement in school. Black students have reported receiving a lack of encouragement, insensitivity, and teachers doubting their academic ability (Codjoe, 2001; Gibbs, 1996). The research findings confirmed the above assertion by proving the opposite to be true. The teachers reported that changing from low to high teacher expectations for student’s results in them excelling.

Teacher involvement and support was identified as a key strategy for students’ success at school. As Codjoe (2001) reported, Black students are often streamed into basic and general levels of education. Overcoming this problem requires support from teachers - “Teachers’ support removes barriers.” Many of the participants claimed that teachers should take the responsibility of adapting their teaching methods to fit the student’s varying learning styles - “some are more visual learners.” Participants expressed that it was important for teachers to capture the attention of their students. An author by the name of Stephen Peters was quoted by one participant as saying, “first you must capture their attention, inspire, and then you can teach them.”
Many participants felt that teachers of colour needed to be more visible and active among their students, and that role modeling for youth of African and Caribbean descent was integral to their success. One participant was quoted as saying, “obviously role modeling is a key piece when you’re talking about Black kids.” This is supported by Codjo (2001) who stated, “it is important that schools reflect the community’s composition, as well as provide positive role models for all students” (p.369).

Parental involvement is a very important factor. Participants felt that if parents are focused and are involved in their children’s education it can help them to achieve success. Many also felt that parents need to do just as much ‘in-reaching’ into the schools as the school must step up their outreach to the parents of African and Caribbean Youth. Language was however seen to present a significant barrier to some parents, particularly those parents who cannot speak English because they may be newcomers to Canada. Adjustment problems affecting youth and their parent’s capacity to assist with educational support are well documented in the literature (Henry, 1999; Yee, J., Johns, C., Tam, S., & Apputhurai-Paul, N., 2003). Overall, the findings indicate that it takes the student, the parent, and the teacher to help youth of African and Caribbean descent succeed at school.

**Gaps Addressed by the Research**

While barriers to the educational success of youth of African and Caribbean descent have been researched fairly extensively, as evidenced by the literature review, it is important to note the very limited research that has been undertaken to identify the factors that lead to the educational success of these youth. While the current research study did set out to identify the barriers to educational success for youth of African and Caribbean descent, it was also a primary goal to identify the pathways that lead to the educational success of these youth. The research
findings demonstrate a strong focus on both of these research areas. The strategies for success identified in this study by the youth and the teachers/administrators provide a fair amount of information, adding substantially to the scarce amount that already existed in this area. This has important implications for future research endeavours in this area, as there is now an increased body of knowledge from which to base future research studies. Not only do the identified strategies compliment Rhamie and Hallam’s (2002) four primary categories of factors leading to success, but they also go beyond this, addressing the structures in place that are at the foundation of these barriers, such as the way the school system is organized. The identified barriers also add to the extensive literature already available.

**Limitations of the Research**

There were several limitations associated with this research study. The size of the agency was one limitation in terms of resource capacity to undertake extensive outreach to recruit participants. Another limitation to the research came out of having a homogenous sample of teachers. Though White teachers, and their teaching practices, were considered as barriers, they were not present at the focus group, only Black teachers were present.

Limitations were also seen with the power dynamics between researchers and youth. Researchers’ affiliation with an institution, Carleton University, gives the connotation of ‘experts’ versus ‘non-experts.’ Due to this power differential, youth may have felt intimidated by the researchers, potentially affecting their responses. At each of the youth focus groups the researchers outnumbered the participants, creating a potentially intimidating situation for the youth. Along with this, the small youth participation rate made for a small sample size, which inevitably limited the amount of experiences/ideas shared. Finally, while researchers’ subjective interpretation of data is one of the benefits of qualitative research it is seen by some people as a
limitation. Researchers analyze data through a particular lens, in this case influenced by experiences such as being a graduate student, a Black student, a White student, a prospective Social Worker, etc. These influences are impossible to completely control for, therefore inevitably affected the interpretation of the research data. Future research should ideally incorporate recruitment separate from the collaborating agency to limit possible bias and to potentially attract a more heterogeneous sample.

Recommendations to Jaku Konbit

Based on the results of the research study, the researchers have highlighted some key recommendations for Jaku Konbit.

1. Tutoring Program
   - One-on-One interaction between tutor and student
   - Diverse teaching styles: Discover knowledge and skill levels of students
   - Explore with students the most effective ways they learn
   - Provide students with role models, to help reach them before they give up

2. Community Mentor Program
   - Target Black teachers, administrators, youth, and community members for the mentoring program
   - Create parent support groups
   - Become liaisons between parents and teachers/administrators

3. Training Programs for Teachers
   - Cultural sensitivity/diversity training for teachers
   - Educational programs for parents on the dynamics of the school system, and their role as parents in contributing to the success of their children

4. Connect with other organizations undertaking similar work for different marginalized populations
   - Share ideas on how to best help youth facing education barriers
   - Enable youth to interact to share experiences and become allies
   - Advocate together for change to structural issues

5. Projects
   - Youth lead projects:
     - Depiction of barriers and strategies for success
     via book mark/video ventures, etc.
Advocacy project:
- Target community members, rally support for changes in school system
- Target Provincial Government, with the support of community members, for changes to curriculum

Conclusion

This study uncovered several significant issues that youth of African and Caribbean descent face within the school system, and it also identified strategies that could help address barriers identified at different levels. This research study identified barriers that exist at three levels: within the education system; within the social environment which youth function; and at the individual level. First, several major system-based barriers were identified, such as lack of Black teachers to act as role-models for African and Caribbean students, curriculum that does not represent Black history and ineffective teacher training. These findings may in part explain another finding, the under representation of African and Caribbean Students in Math and Science classes.

Secondly, the environmental context of learning was identified as having a major influence on the educational success of youth of African and Caribbean descent. Identified environmental factors included such things as lack of support from family due to language difficulties; lack of parental involvement in students’ learning; and the lack of support received from teachers. Together these factors deprive youth of the support they need for learning, particularly in the subjects of English, Math and Science.

Thirdly, perceptions/experiences of racial discrimination were explored as key barriers to the educational success of youth of African and Caribbean descent. Motivation plays a key role in learning and can be severely affected by self perception and perceptions/experiences of the school environment. A major barrier identified in the study points to the perceptions/experiences of stereotyping and labelling of African and Caribbean youth by peers and teachers, for example,
the stereotype that Black youth are “not smart.” These perceptions could in part explain another finding about the low expectation of students’ abilities, specifically in English, Math and Science, by both teachers and students alike.

This study went a step further than most previous studies by considering strategies for addressing the educational barriers identified by participants; what one researcher terms as “racialized barriers,” which stand in the way of success for these students (Codjoe, 2001). This additional focus, and subsequent findings, is not thoroughly explored in the literature and therefore this information is the study’s key contribution to the existing research on the barriers to educational success for African and Caribbean youth. This was a particular area that the current research study emphasized and it is felt that this information will be of great benefit to youth of African and Caribbean descent, and will provide useful information for community organizations such as Jaku Konbit. Organizations can use this information to act upon some of the strategies identified. Findings focus greatly on structural issues, a key focus inherent in the Structural Social Work framework which guided this research study.

This research study identified key strategies for overcoming both system-based and environmental barriers, as well as strategies for helping individual students to succeed in the subjects of English, Math and Science. The system-based and environmental barriers need to be addressed at different levels. One of these levels is balancing power relations between the school system and teachers to allow not only empowerment of teachers, but also so teachers can adopt the curriculum to accommodate different teaching styles for the different learning needs of youth. Also, complimenting the power balance is the need to increase knowledge, sensitivity and awareness to issues of diversity that are pertinent to the social and cultural learning for African and Caribbean youth, and that are consistent with multicultural education policies within
the system of education. Youth of African and Caribbean descent need to feel that they are positively represented within school curriculum. Currently it seems that the education curriculum is based on a Eurocentric model which has little or distorted views about other cultural and racial groups. Youth reported perceptions that the system of education was “anti-Black,” they “didn’t feel a sense of belonging,” or plainly, “some of the teachers didn’t know what Idi stands for!”

This study points to the need to change education policy in order to embrace an Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppression framework. The curriculum must reflect the diversity which is present in school boards across the country. Power imbalances that exist within the school system among educators, administrators, parents and students needs to be reviewed and restructured using a collaborative political process involving all concerned. If real change is to happen, there must be equal representation at all levels of the change process. The research findings show that while most barriers to educational success stem from systemic and structural problems, individual youth, parents, teachers and community leaders must be equally involved and responsive to needed change. Most importantly, more research will be needed to better understand how this fundamental change in education policy can happen.

It is equally important to note that Social Work does have a very critical role to play in bridging the gap between education policy and practice. Social workers play key roles in advocacy and helping educate people about the impacts of education policy. This role is particularly important when it comes to the African and Caribbean community who may or may not know much about the education policy and how it affects the education of their children.

This study, on a small scale, has laid a foundation from which to work in order to improve educational success for youth from non-Eurocentric cultures, particularly youth of African and Caribbean descent, who may be facing educational barriers. The researchers
therefore conclude with a suggestion that future research should explore how to address the following question: What can be done at the larger school system level in order to change the curriculum and make needed adjustments to teacher’s education?
References


IF SO, THEN HELP US HELP YOU!!!

If you are a youth of African or Caribbean decent, between the ages of 16-19, this is for you! Carleton University School of Social Work wants to hear about what is holding YOU back. Interactive focus groups will be held in English at: Jaku Konbit, 211 Bronson Avenue, in January / February 2008

What WE learn from YOU will help these barriers to be better addressed in YOUR community.

Food will be served

For more information call: 613-567-0600
www.jakukonbit.com
Letter of Information: Youth

Title of Study: Uncovering Barriers and Identifying Pathways to Educational Success

[Revised on December 29th, 2007]

As a group of student researchers from Carleton University’s Master of Social Work Program, we will be conducting research to find out the ways that youth of African and Caribbean background do well in school and the things that cause them to have difficulties in the following subjects: Math, Science, and English. We are working together with Jaku Konbit, an organization that is helping youth with homework and after-school help. What we learn from this research will be used to plan for better ways to help youth succeed in school.

For this research to happen we would like to speak to you, if you are 16-19 years old, you or your parents came from Africa or from the Caribbean islands, and you live in Ottawa. You will be invited to come to a group activity which will take place in January / February 2008 at Jaku Konbit organization, 211 Bronson Avenue in Ottawa. This activity will take 1.5 hour where you, along with your peers, will discuss and participate in creative and fun activities to show your experience in school, such as when you have difficulties in a particular subject, or when you are doing really well.

Participation in this research is free, but, bus tickets will be provided to you at the end of the group activity. We will also provide you with food during the activity.

A 5 minute follow-up email will be sent to you after the group activity so you can write to us anything that you may have forgotten to mention during the group exercise.

We cannot ensure that other youth in the group activity will not talk about your involvement in this research, but, our research group will make sure that no information linking you to the research project will be included in our final report. You are free to withdraw at anytime during the group activity, you can also withdraw any information that was for sure provided by you. Any papers with your personal information on it, such as your name, that would make it possible for someone to know that it was yours will be locked away by our research supervisor, Professor Karen Schwartz, in a secure place at Carleton University. This will be locked up until the research is completed and after the research project is done it will be destroyed.

The written report at the end of this research will be presented to the Jaku Konbit Board of Directors and to the Carleton School of Social Work. There is also a possibility that this research will be presented at conferences and on the World Wide Web.

We understand that some participants may find the information discussed to be emotionally difficult. Due to this, free counselling services will be provided through Jaku Konbit. You can
contact the counsellor at: Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa - (613)260-2360 or 1-877-377-7775 (if outside of Ottawa), if required.
This research project has been approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee. If you have further questions you may contact any of the following individuals:

Prof. Antonio Gualtieri, Chair  
Carleton University Research Ethics Committee  
Carleton University  
Ottawa ON K1S 5B6  
613-520-2517  
ethics@carleton.ca

or

Jaku Konbit Organization at 613-567-0600

or

Student researchers at uncovering.barriers.study@gmail.com

Thank you for your interest in this research project.

Sincerely,

Alice Layiki-Dehne  
Akosua Agyei-Amoama  
Julian Ashley  
Ying Zeng  
Monica O'Donnell  
Nikki MacDonald
Letter of Information: Teachers / Administrators

Title of Study: Uncovering Barriers and Identifying Pathways to Educational Success
Carleton School of Social Work:
Master of Social Work Program

Student Researchers from Carleton University’s Master of Social Work Program will be conducting research to identify the educational barriers and factors which lead to success, particularly in the areas of Math, Science, and English, facing youth of African and Caribbean decent. This research project is being completed on behalf of Jaku Konbit. Results from this research will be used by this organization to assist in the planning of educational enrichment programs and activities of benefit to these youth. This research is being conducted as part of the requirements for graduation in the Master of Social Work program for the student researchers conducting this study.

As part of this research project teachers/administrators from the Ottawa area will be asked to participate in a 1-1.5 hour focus group session with 8-10 participants. This focus group will take place on February 16, 2008 at Jaku Konbit organization located at 211 Bronson Avenue. In your focus group, you will be asked to share/discuss your views of what these educational barriers and factors for success may be. Within a few days following your focus group you will be asked to complete a survey, via email. This survey will provide you with the opportunity to report any information you may have missed sharing during the focus group.

A research report will be produced at the end of the study, and this report will be presented to the Board of Jaku Konbit organization and to Carleton University School of Social Work. There is also the possibility that this research will be presented at conferences and on the World Wide Web.

Since the research will be completed in a group setting the researchers cannot guarantee you confidentiality of participating in this research. Researchers can guarantee however that your identity will remain confidential in the dissemination of the research information. You are also free to withdraw from the research at any time, and will have the option of withdrawing any information that can be linked to you alone. All identifying information will be locked in a filing cabinet at Carleton University School of Social work until the research is completed. This identifying information will then be destroyed. Please see Consent Form for more details regarding above mentioned issues.

We understand that some participants may find the information discussed to be difficult. Due to this, free counselling services will be provided through Jaku Konbit. If you require counselling services after this research please, call 613-260-2360.
This research project has been approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any questions please contact:

Prof. Antonio Gualtieri, Chair  
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or

-Jaku Konbit Organization at 613-567-0600

or

-Student researchers at uncovering.barriers.study@gmail.com

Thank you for your interest in this research project.

Sincerely,

Alice Layiki-Dehne  
Akosua Agyei-Amoama  
Julian Ashley  
Ying Zeng  
Monica O’Donnell  
Nikki MacDonald
CONSENT/ ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT
Carleton School of Social Work
Master of Social Work Program

Title of Study: Uncovering Barriers to Educational and Identifying Pathways to Educational Success

Ethics Approval Date: January 9, 2008
December 4, 2007- Revised December 29th, 2007

Researchers: Monica O’ Donnell, Juliana Ashley,
Alice Layiki-Dehne, Nicole MacDonald,
Ying Zeng and Akosua Agyei-Amoama

Participants: Youth of African and Caribbean Descent

I have been invited to participate in a research study on the educational barriers that African and Caribbean student face in school and the positive things I do to improve my success at school. I received a written description of the research project. I understand that before I give my consent/assent to participate, it is important that I read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure I understand what I will be required to do.

Purpose of research
I understand that the purpose of this research is to ask youth (ages 16 to 19) to share their views and opinions about what educational barriers they are faced with daily. I understand that my views will be included in a report. From this report, it is Jaku Konbit’s goal to create a tutoring program. I understand that my participation in this project is by choice, and it is not part of regular class activities or any programs I am involved in. I also understand that I can drop out at any time, and it will not affect my class activities or programs.

I understand that once I decide to participate, I can stop participating at anytime and I will be given the opportunity to take out any information that can be linked to myself. I also understand that at any particular point in the study, if I do not want to answer any particular question(s), this is fine.

Description of the Study:
I understand that I have been asked to participate in a focus group (8-10 students) that will take up to one hour and that our discussions will be recorded and written down. I am aware that these focus groups will occur between January and February 2008. Bus tickets will be provided by Jaku Konbit for youth who attend the focus group to cover transportation costs.

Risks or Discomforts in this Research:
I understand that throughout the discussions sensitive topics may be discussed. At any point, if I feel uncomfortable sharing my thoughts verbally, I will have the opportunity to write down my thoughts on note paper (will be provided) without identifying who I am. I also understand that I
will be given access to a counselor provided by Jaku Konbit, if I need to talk to someone after the focus group.

Counsellor’s contact information: Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa - (613)260-2360 or 1-877-377-7775 (if outside of Ottawa).

**Confidentiality:**
I understand that the researchers cannot guarantee that other focus group members will not share that I have participated in this project with other people. However, I understand that the researchers will take steps to protect my confidentiality by keeping all research materials secure in a locked filing cabinet that only the researchers will have access too. In addition, I understand that the researchers can guarantee that my name will not be identified and linked with responses in the report. I understand that the researchers will protect my confidentiality, but if I provide information about: harm to self; or harm to others; or that a child is at risk, researchers must report this information.

After the focus group the researchers will send out a brief follow up via email in the form of a questionnaire. If you would like to participate in this survey, please right down your email information

E-mail address: uncovering.barriers.study@gmail.com

After the study is complete, which will be April 2008 I understand that the researchers will destroy all the data collected, except for any artistic materials (collages made during focus group) that I would like Jaku Konbit to keep.

**Sharing of Research**
I understand that the researchers will provide a copy of their report to Jaku Konbit (staff, members and board) and their University Professor at Carleton University. I understand that I can read the final report if I request to. I also understand that the report may be shared at conferences, classroom presentation/exercises, website/publication, workshop, and a course research paper.

**Benefits of the Study:**
I understand the main benefit of this study is providing the opportunity to have many voices heard through the use of focus group discussions to identify the educational barriers that youth of African and Caribbean Descent face and the successful steps they are taking to achieve their goals while in school. This information will be used to create appropriate programs to meet the challenges facing youth, such as the Tutoring Program.

**Questions about the Study:**
I understand that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Carleton University Ethics Committee. If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Carleton University Ethics Chair for information.
Research Ethics Board Chair:  
Prof. Antonio Gualtieri, Chair  
Carleton University Research Ethics Committee  
Carleton University  
Ottawa ON K1S 5B6  
613-520-2517  
ethics@carleton.ca

Or any of the following individuals:

Researchers:  
Monica O’ Donnell, Juliana Ashley, Alice Layiki-Dehne, Nicole McDonald, Ying Zeng, and Akosua Agyei-Amoama by phone: (613) 520-2600 ext.3514

Supervisor of Project:  
Karen Schwartz, Ph.D. Assistant Professor. School of Social Work. Carleton University. E-mail: Karen_schwartz@carleton.ca phone (613) 520-2600 ext. 3514

Agreement:  
I understand that my signature below indicates that I have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions I have about the study. I also understand that my signature indicates that I agree to be in the study and have been told that I can change my mind and can drop out at anytime. I have been given a copy of this agreement and I have been told that by signing this consent/ assent agreement I am not giving up any of my legal rights.

Sign PRIOR to starting the focus group

________________________________________________________________________Date: ________________

Name of Focus Group Participant (please print)

________________________________________________________________________

Signature of Focus Group Participant

________________________________________________________________________Date ________________

Signature of Researcher

________________________________________________________________________Date ________________
CONSENT/ ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT
Carleton School of Social Work
Master of Social Work Program

Title of Study: Uncovering Barriers and Identifying Pathways to Educational Success

Ethics Approval Date: _February 14, 2008_  December 4, 2007- Revised January 29, 2007

Researchers:  Monica O’ Donnell, Juliana Ashley,
Alice Layiki-Dehne, Nicole MacDonald,
Ying Zeng and Akosua Agyei-Amoama

Participants: Teachers/Administrators

I have been invited to participate in a research study on the educational barriers that African and Caribbean students experience in school. I understand that before I give my consent to participate, it is important that I read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure I understand what I will be required to do.

**Purpose of research**
I understand that the purpose of this research is to determine and/or examine the educational barriers youth of African and Caribbean Descent encounter and identify pathways for educational success. I understand that summaries of these views and opinions gathered through focus groups will be compiled into a final report to justify the creation of tutoring programs at Jaku Konbit, which will improve the academic and social well being of the youth.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I also understand that my decision of whether or not to participate will not influence my future relations with Jaku Konbit or institution involved in this research project.

I understand that upon deciding to participate, freedom to withdraw is acceptable at any stage of the research. If I decide to withdraw, I will be given the opportunity to extract any information that can be attributed to myself. I also understand that at any particular point in the study, refusal to answer any particular question or stop participation is acceptable.

**Description of the Study:**
I understand that teachers and administrators will participate in 1 hour focus group discussions under the supervision of researchers. There will be a total of 3 focus groups, 2 youth peer groups (8-10 youth) and 1 group for teachers/administrators (8-10). These focus groups will take place between January to February 2008.
Risks or Discomforts in this Research:

I understand that risks or discomforts associated with this research are mainly anticipated in situations where sensitive topics for some may be raised in the focus group discussions. In such instances, participants will be allowed to anonymously write down their thoughts on note-paper that will be provided (if they feel comfortable doing so). I also understand that focus group participants can withdraw at anytime (permanently or temporarily). There will be adequate opportunities for debriefing and/or counseling provided through Jaku Konbit if such services are required.

Confidentiality:
I understand that the researchers cannot guarantee that other focus group members will keep participation in this research confidential. However, I understand that the researchers will take steps to protect my right to confidentiality by keeping all research materials secure in a locked filing cabinet that only the researchers will have access too. In addition, I understand that the researchers can guarantee that my name will not be identified and associated with responses in the report. I understand that the researchers will protect my confidentiality, but if I provide information about: harm to self; or harm to others; or that a child is at risk, researchers must report this information.

After the focus group the researchers will send out a brief follow up via email in the form of a questionnaire. If you would like to participate in this survey please right down your email information.

E-mail address: ________________________________ (please use your personal e-mail address and not your work address in order to keep your participation private).

After the study is complete, which will be April 2008 I understand that the researchers will destroy all the data collected, except for any artistic materials (collages made during focus group) that I would like Jaku Konbit to keep.

Dissemination of Research:
I understand that the researchers will provide a copy of their report to Jaku Konbit (staff, members and board) and the University Professor at Carleton University. I understand that I can have access to the final report upon my request. I also understand that the report may be shared at conferences, classroom presentation/exercises, website/publication, workshop, and a course research paper.

Benefits of the Study:
I understand that the main benefit of this study is having a collective group of voices heard through the focus group discussions, which will be used to create appropriate programs to meet the challenges facing African and Caribbean youth, such as a Tutoring Program.
Questions about the Study:
I understand that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee. If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Carleton University Research Ethics Chair for information.

Research Ethics Board Chair:
Prof. Antonio Gualtieri, Chair
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Or any of the following individuals:

Researchers:
Monica O’Donnell, Juliana Ashley, Alice Layiki-Dehne, Nicole McDonald, Ying Zeng, and Akosua Agyei-Amoama by phone: (613) 520-2600 ext.3514 or Email: uncovering.barriers.study@gmail.com

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Agreement:
I understand that my signature below indicates that I have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions I have about the study. I also understand that my signature indicates that I agree to be in the study and have been told that I can change my mind and withdraw my consent to participate at any time. I have been given a copy of this agreement.

Name of Focus Group Participant (please print)
_________________________________________ __________________

Signature of Focus Group Participant __________________________ Date __________ 

Signature of Researcher __________________________ Date __________
Uncovering Barriers and Identifying Pathways to Educational Success
Youth Focus Group Activities:

We would first like to welcome everyone for coming out to this focus group session today. My name is (facilitator’s name) and here are the other members of the group (introduce the group). As you know it is our goal today to start to identify and name some of the possible barriers to educational success that you being youth of African and Caribbean decent face when entering high school.

Today’s focus group is going to consist of some small group activities followed by a larger group discussion. The purpose of these activities is to help get you talking about your experiences both negative and positive in school that has had an effect of your individual success. Particular attention will be made to the subjects of Math, English and Science.

The other members of the research group are going to be observing us in the small and large groups and taking on notes on the discussions that we have. If you have any questions or concerns at any time please feel free to let me know. We have one and a half hours for the session starting now.

Icebreaker: (15 minutes)

Throw out a role of toilet paper and tell the students to take as much as they need. (Don't tell them what it's for).

After everyone has taken some, have them tear the toilet paper at the perforations. When it is their turn they introduce themselves and then for each square of paper in their possession, they have to share either one reason why they came to the focus group, or something that they hope to get out of the session.

Activity One: Definitions (10 minutes)

So the first thing that we need to do is to define some of the terms that we are going to be using today. We will as a group brainstorm some ideas about what these terms mean to you. After that I am going to share with you how we the research group has defined these terms for the purpose of this research project. So now we will take a look at the terms that we are going to define.

Barriers
Youth of African and Caribbean decent
Success in Education

So what are some ideas you have for what these terms could mean?

On a flip chart write down the definitions that they group comes up with.

So now that we have started to create your definitions, let’s hear what the definition that the research group created for this study.
**Barrier**: Are obstacles or challenges that get in the way of you performing to your full capacity. There are things that make it difficult for you to perform well in school. For example: A barrier to getting a good job could be a lack of education.

**Youth of African and Caribbean decent**: This definition is how you all see yourselves. For the purpose of this project we wanted participants whose families have immigrated to Canada from Africa or the Caribbean.

**Success in Education**: Means that you feel that you have been able to do your best in school. It is the idea that you understand your teachers and the subjects that you are taking, that you feel good about school and the work that you produce.

**Questions for Discussion**: (10 minutes)
1. Does anyone have questions by what we mean by any of these terms?
2. Can you think of an example of something that can be seen as a ‘barriers to success’ in life?
3. What challenges/barriers do you feel you and your peers face because of your African or Caribbean decent.

**Activity Two: Creative Activity/ Creating Images** (15 minutes)

In this activity you are going to be asked to use the magazines and markers that we have provided and create a collage that represents both positive and negative experiences that you have faced since being in high school. If your group does not feel that it will be able to make a collage you are free to create a poem or short play. We want you to really think about what you go through every day at school, what stands out to you. What has gotten in your way of your learning? Does anything cause you to lose your focus, or concentration? What are things that you like about school and things you don’t like about school? What makes you do well in school, and what gets in your way of doing well?

You will have 15 minutes to complete this activity and then will present your creative representation of your high school experience to the group.

While they present one of the group members is writing down the issues presented in collages on flip chart paper.

When all the groups have presented have everyone look at the flip charts. And facilitate the group in the following questions.

**Questions for Discussion**: (15 minutes)
1. What common themes do you see between the different groups’ interpretations (if any)?
2. What do you believe is required for a person to do well in school? What supports, strengths or services are needed to ensure success?
3. What are some difficulties that you see yourself or your friends having in school? Are these problems something that is out of your control?
4. How do you think some of these identified experiences (pick some possible barriers that had been identified) effect how well you do in school?
Activity Three: Looking at Math, Science and English (10 minutes)

In a few minutes you are going to get back into your small groups. This time each group is going to be assigned a specific subject in school. The first thing that we would like your group to do is list the words or feelings that come to you mind when you hear this subject mentioned, just try to identify the words that come to mind. List these on your flip chart

The next thing that we want you to talk about in your group is things that you like and dislike about these subjects. Make a list of these likes and dislike on the flip chart.

You will have 10 minutes for this activity and then you will be asked to report your groups’ lists to the rest of us.

When they come back to the large group have everyone sit in a circle again.

Questions for Discussion: (15 minutes)

1. So when I talk about the subject of Math what thought come to your mind. (ask the group who had the subject to observe what the others say) Then the group will reveal what their initial reactions were. Are there any similarities with the larger group’s thoughts? **Do this process for the other two subjects Science and English.**

2. Now the groups are going to present the things that they identified as liking and disliking about each subjects. Have the larger group raise their hands if they agree with each like and dislike the group raises.

3. From what we just stated as being things that what we like and dislike about these subjects, can anything be seen as a barrier? Are there common themes in what the group likes and dislikes?

Closing: (5 minutes)

We would like that thank all of you for coming to the session today. We hope that you all had a good time. You have provided us with great information which will enrich our research project. Is there anything else that anyone wants to talk about, questions or concerns before we leave?

We would like to remind you that if anyone is feeling like they need to talk to someone about anything that was said today, arrangements can be made. Please make sure that you provided us with your email address if you want to receive the follow up survey. This is a chance to let us know about anything that you might be uncomfortable sharing in the group, or anything that you might think of after leaving here today. You can also let us know what you thought about the focus group today.
Teacher/Administrator Questionnaire:

1. Do you have experience working with new immigrant youth of African and Caribbean descent?

2. How is the academic performance of new immigrant youth of African and Caribbean descent in your school?

3. Do you have any difficulties teaching new immigrant youth of African and Caribbean descent? If yes, what are the challenges?

4. What are some strategies in addressing these challenges?

5. Based on your experience or observation, what are the main barriers new immigrant youth of African and Caribbean descent face in school?

6. How does the school serve the needs of new immigrant youth?

7. What services/programs do you think will be useful for new immigrant youth of African and Caribbean descent?
Uncovering Barriers and Identifying Pathways to Educational Success
Follow Up Survey:

On behalf of the Carleton University, School of Social Work student researcher group and Jaku Konbit we would like to thank you for participating in our research Uncovering Barriers to Educational Success. Since attending the focus groups is there anything that you have identified as additional ‘barriers’ in your success (for teachers/administrator ‘barriers’ youth of African and Caribbean decent face) in educational success? If so we would encourage you to let us know. If you have any other feelings about the focus group that you attended or any other questions about the project please email us.

Again we would like to thank-you for taking the time to participate in this study.

After filling our this form you can email it back to uncovering.barriers.study@gmail.com

1. Other possible ‘Barriers’ that I (or for the teachers and administrators, the youth) face to success in education are;

2. Something that I feel the research group should be aware of is;