Kujenga Youth Wellbeing Project



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Complied and Prepared by: Nicole Perryman, Executive Director, Ifarada: Centre for Excellence. Featured photos were taken at the 2026 Tallawah Youth Conference by Keane Photography and Teeography

1. Kiini cha Ripoti (Executive Summary)

It is with great appreciation that Ifarada Centre for Excellence and Durham Family and Cultural Centre submit the final report for the Kujenga Youth Wellbeing Project, funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) through the Social Development Partnerships Program – Social Inclusion, from September 12, 2022, to August 31, 2026. Kujenga, Swahili for “to build,” was designed to strengthen the social and mental wellbeing of Black and racialized children, youth, and families through culturally responsive mental-health supports, parenting and family services, youth leadership and transition programming, cultural engagement, mentorship, and community partnerships.



Over the course of the Project, Kujenga delivered more than 180 programs and initiatives, reached more than 5,000 community members, and cultivated more than 100 partnerships and community relationships. The Project exceeded several of its intended activities and expanded significantly beyond its original delivery model. More than 400 parents and caregivers participated in over 30 parenting workshops; more than 1,500 participant engagements were recorded through therapeutic-themed programming; more than 200 youth participated in experiential activities; more than 42 mentor-led workshops were delivered; and more than 315 youth participated across transitional programming, mentorship, professional networking, and life-coaching activities.The numbers cannot fully capture the dedication, creativity, and sacrifice behind them. Behind every program delivered and every family supported were people who kept showing up for the community, often through difficult and changing conditions.

We are deeply grateful to Employment and Social Development Canada for its multi-year investment in this work and for providing an opportunity for two Black-led organizations to develop, strengthen, and expand culturally responsive supports for children, youth, families, and communities. I am deeply grateful to Durham Family and Cultural Centre for walking alongside Ifarada throughout this Project. Their team delivered innovative, youth-led, and creative programming that gave young people space to connect, learn, explore their identities, and imagine new possibilities. They remained committed through the ebbs and flows of funding and implementation, and I have deeply valued the opportunity to learn from their leadership, their team, and their approach to community work. To the Ifarada team: you developed strong programs, stretched beyond your comfort zones, engaged in difficult conversations, and remained responsive to the changing needs of children, youth, and families. Your creativity, passion, and commitment to developing innovative programs for youth have helped build a community that others have come to rely on. Whenever there was a task to complete, an outreach goal to meet, or an issue to address, you worked together as a team to develop solutions and consistently exceeded expectations. Overall,

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you brought professional expertise, lived experience, compassion, creativity, and cultural knowledge to this work, and you grew alongside the Project and the community you served.



Facilitators, professional leaders, Elders, mentors, students, volunteers, community members, and partners contributed their time, knowledge, expertise, relationships, and hearts because they believed that children, youth, and families deserve culturally responsive, affirming, accessible, and meaningful opportunities to thrive. Working alongside the community was critical because many of the resources required to strengthen children and families already existed within the relationships, histories, knowledge, and leadership of the community itself. Elders were invited to serve as storytellers, knowledge keepers, and guides, helping young people connect with cultural history, identity, resilience, intergenerational wisdom, and a stronger sense of belonging. Mentors and professionals provided representation, practical knowledge, encouragement, and exposure to educational, employment, leadership, and life opportunities that young people may not otherwise have encountered. The Project also intentionally created opportunities for other community leaders and organizations to contribute their expertise, resources, spaces, networks, and ideas. These collaborations expanded access to programming, strengthened referral pathways, increased the visibility of available supports, and connected children, youth, and families to a broader network of trusted people and organizations. Kujenga did not position organizations as the sole holders of knowledge or solutions. Instead, it created space for lived experience, cultural knowledge, professional expertise, youth voice, family perspectives, and community leadership to work together. Through these relationships, the Project strengthened community capacity, created new connections, supported emerging leaders, and contributed to a network of relationships that can continue to benefit children, youth, and families beyond the life of the Project.

One moment continues to represent the Project for me. At the 2026 Tallawah Youth Conference, I watched conference host Kwame Osei speak to a room filled with young people. I remember their faces, their excitement, their eagerness, and their willingness to fully participate in a space that had been intentionally created for them.

This was not simply work. It was soul work.

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Even when we could not transform every system surrounding the young people and families we served, we could create opportunities, open doors, build relationships, and plant seeds. At Tallawah, surrounded by young people who were learning, laughing, questioning, and imagining their futures together, I knew those seeds had already taken root.

Together, we built programs, partnerships, leadership opportunities, and pathways for children, youth, and families. We also built something harder to measure trust, belonging, hope, and the belief that culturally grounded community work creates meaningful change. To everyone who showed up, contributed, trusted us, and challenged us: thank you.

We may have started out as grassroots organizations carving out a place in our community, but we learned that we were Tallawah: small but mighty.

Asante
Medasse Paa

Nicole Perryman, Executive Director
Ifarada Centre for Excellence

2. Msingi: Laying the Foundation

2.1. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, contributed to highlighting the intersections between race, class, gender, and systemic oppression. Systemic racism prevalent in countries such as Canada and the United States became increasingly visible through media coverage, prompting governments and institutions to account for the disparities and disproportionalities evident within their communities. In addition, young people experienced significant mental health concerns, academic and developmental delays, and disruptions resulting from periods of social isolation, heightened fear associated with the pandemic, and experiences of grief and loss. Families also experienced increased discord and conflict, contributing to a rise in intimate partner violence, co-parenting conflict, and separation.

The multi-year, partnership-focused funding provided an opportunity for organizations to collaborate in addressing the needs of youth affected by the global pandemic and the challenges that intensified during this period. These included racism, systemic inequities, social isolation, increased internet and social media use and its associated risks, family and parental conflict, and other issues affecting the wellbeing of children, youth, and families. Durham Family and Cultural Centre and Ifarada: Centre for Excellence were able to develop a partnership to deliver comprehensive family and social services to children, youth, and adults aimed at addressing community needs and improving outcomes. Recognizing the importance of a coordinated community response, both organizations came together to combine their unique programming, expertise, and perspectives to develop a comprehensive and culturally responsive initiative. Through this partnership, both organizations sought to address immediate challenges while creating meaningful opportunities for healing, connection, personal development, and community resilience.

The Project centred on children and youth and improving outcomes related to mental health, family wellness, parental education, social connectedness, cultural pride, and life-skill development. Derived from the Swahili word meaning “to build,” Kujenga aimed to improve outcomes for Black and racialized children, youth, and families through culturally responsive services, collaborative programming, and community engagement. The Project sought to strengthen individuals, families, and communities through culturally responsive interventions, meaningful relationships, and opportunities for personal and collective growth.

When this partnership began, both organizations were grassroots initiatives grounded in a shared commitment to addressing the needs of underserved communities. Over four years, the partnership evolved through changes in staffing, program delivery, organizational capacity, and community relationships. Despite these transitions, both organizations remained committed to providing accessible, culturally grounded programming that supported family wellbeing, youth development, and community resilience.

The Kujenga Youth Wellbeing Project facilitated and delivered more than 180 programs, reaching thousands of community members. Many programs were delivered simultaneously across schools and community settings, with multiple sessions designed to provide consistent engagement and support. This approach allowed the project team to reach young people where they were, creating opportunities for participation within familiar and accessible environments. Program delivery was guided by holistic, trauma-informed, Africentric, and Indigenous approaches to care, with an emphasis on strengthening social and emotional wellbeing, cultural and racial pride, family relationships, and community belonging.

2.2. Project Objectives and Program Delivery

The Kujenga Youth Wellbeing Project was guided by four interconnected service objectives: strengthening parenting skills and family relationships; improving mental health and social wellbeing; supporting youth as they transitioned into adulthood; and enhancing social, emotional, and cultural pride among Black and racialized participants. Developing sustainable community partnerships was central to the Project's implementation.

Through a multidisciplinary team consisting of a Team Lead, Family Wellbeing Professional, Child and Youth Facilitators, administrative support, cultural Elders, and external contractors, the Project delivered a range of coordinated services and initiatives. Underlying these service areas was a holistic approach to healing that considered the whole person within the context of their family, community, culture, and broader social environment. This approach reflected the cultural knowledge and practices that have guided Black and Indigenous communities for generations, recognizing the importance of land, community, spirituality, identity, and collective wellbeing in healing.

Grounded in Critical Race Theory and informed by a Black feminist approach, the Project also recognized community members as holders of knowledge and expertise. Healing was therefore understood as relational and interconnected and shaped collectively through relationships among community members, families, cultural knowledge holders, and the organizations serving alongside them.

The Kujenga Project offered:

- Parent workshops and family outreach programs supported caregivers navigating family conflict, relationship difficulties, anti-Black racism, social isolation, and challenges associated with parenting and youth development. Through workshops, discussion groups, individualized support, and connections to community resources, families had opportunities to strengthen parenting confidence, develop practical strategies, and build supportive relationships.
- Therapeutic group programs provided children and youth with opportunities to develop social and emotional skills within culturally responsive and supportive environments. These skill-based interventions addressed anxiety, bullying, emotional regulation, self-confidence, self-esteem, identity, peer relationships, and other challenges affecting young people's wellbeing. Psychotherapy and informal

counselling also supported parents, children, youth, and young adults under 30 years of age. Psychotherapists, external contractors, and members of the wellbeing team provided client-centred, culturally relevant, and trauma-informed interventions designed to respond to participants' individual circumstances and lived experiences.

- Youth leadership, mentorship, and community engagement initiatives created opportunities for young people to develop communication, problem-solving, collaboration, leadership, and practical life skills. Initiatives such as the Youth Leadership Program, youth advisory activities, community development projects, wellness camps, and the Tallawah Youth Conference encouraged youth to contribute their perspectives, develop their talents, and take meaningful roles within their communities.
- Cultural programming and intergenerational engagement strengthened connections to cultural identity, history, creative expression, and community relationships. Initiatives associated with the Kujipenda Cultural Centre, intergenerational learning, expressive arts, and cultural mentorship reflected Ifarada's broader commitment to creating spaces where participants could experience cultural affirmation, belonging, and collective wellbeing.

The more than 180 programs delivered through the Kujenga Project were intentionally designed by drawing together theoretical frameworks, the expertise and lived knowledge of the project team, community and cultural histories, and an ongoing reciprocal exchange of knowledge between participants, families, community members, and practitioners. This dynamic process of co-learning and adaptation became central to how programs were developed and refined, making evaluation an essential component of understanding what was effective, what required adjustment, and how participant and community feedback shaped the Project over time.

2.3. Evaluation Approach and Research

The community played a critical role in the design, delivery, implementation, and ongoing evaluation of Kujenga programs and services. From the outset of the Project, community members were invited to identify their priorities, experiences, concerns, and recommendations. The initial youth focus groups, referred to as Convo Cafés, were hosted in both virtual and in-person settings and were designed to create informal, accessible spaces where young people could speak openly about their experiences. During the early development of the Project, the team also worked with YouthREX to strengthen its approach to youth engagement, develop focus-group questions, and design pre- and post-program evaluation tools. The original Convo Café model was developed as a six-part youth consultation process, with youth feedback intended to directly inform future programming and service development.

Some focus groups centred on the experiences of specific populations. For example, DFCC hosted a focus group for youth who identified as 2SLGBTQIA+, while other consultations engaged Black and racialized youth, newcomer youth, students, young adults, and participants already connected to community programming. Focus groups were

incorporated into school-based programming, community initiatives, conference planning, intergenerational programming, and the evaluation of existing services.

The conversations revealed the complexity and interconnectedness of the concerns affecting young people and their families. Youth expressed significant worries about their futures, financial insecurity and declining economic opportunities, employment, education, family conflict, racism, social isolation, identity and belonging, and increasing pressures on their mental health and wellbeing. Newcomer youth raised questions about their sense of "place" in Canada and described experiences of race-based discrimination within schools and communities, alongside tensions that could emerge as young people and their families navigated different cultural and social expectations. Black parents expressed serious concerns about the anti-Black racism their children encountered within educational environments and the ways these experiences could contribute to academic disengagement, reduced achievement, behavioural concerns, and disconnection from school. On a practical level, parents and caregivers identified affordability and accessibility as barriers to support, including concerns that the cost of traditional therapeutic services placed them beyond the reach of many families. Participants therefore emphasized the importance of accessible, culturally responsive, convenient, and community-based forms of care.

Following these early consultations, two advisory structures were developed to ensure that community participation continued beyond the initial focus groups: a Parent Advisory and a Youth Advisory. Parents met on a bi-monthly basis and contributed to the development of priorities, family events, programming, and approaches to supporting caregivers. Youth met regularly to contribute to organizational and program decisions, including the development of policies, consideration of potential staff and facilitators, the development of a Youth Bill of Rights, outreach strategies, youth-specific events, conference planning, and future programs. Youth Advisory members were not positioned simply as recipients of services; they were invited to identify community concerns, recommend solutions, shape activities, and participate in decision-making about initiatives intended for young people.

Evaluation remained embedded throughout the life of the Project. Pre- and post-program surveys were developed for therapeutic groups, focus groups, and parenting programs, while additional information was gathered through program check-outs, attendance records, facilitator observations, testimonials, client stories, assessments, goal reviews, focus groups, advisory discussions, and participant feedback. Within school-based and community programs, youth and families were also asked what they wanted to learn, what they found helpful, what could be improved, and what emerging concerns required greater attention. Youth contributed to curriculum development and identified their desired program goals, while parents identified their priorities, presenting challenges, and preferences for how parenting supports should be structured.

This approach meant that evaluation extended beyond assessing the performance of individual facilitators or determining whether participants enjoyed a program. Evaluation considered the relevance of the approaches and interventions being used, changes

occurring within participants and families, emerging community needs, barriers to accessing services, and external social conditions influencing participants' lives. Feedback was used to modify programming, identify new areas of need, strengthen culturally responsive approaches, and determine where additional mentorship, individualized support, practical resources, or alternative forms of engagement were required.

The Project also generated substantial qualitative knowledge. Participant narratives, focus-group findings, facilitator reflections, program reports, surveys, literature reviews, and organizational impact reports provided a detailed view of the diverse and evolving experiences of Black and racialized children, youth, and families. Across these sources, recurring themes included the importance of culturally affirming and emotionally safe spaces, meaningful relationships with trusted adults and mentors, opportunities for youth voice and leadership, cultural identity and representation, family and community connection, practical skill development, and accessible mental-health and wellness supports. The evaluation process therefore became more than a mechanism for measuring outcomes; it functioned as an ongoing reciprocal exchange of knowledge between the community and the Project team, allowing community experience to continuously inform how Kujenga understood need, defined success, and developed its programs and services.

2.4. Emerging Themes and Community Needs

The Project began at a time when young people and families were becoming fully immersed in a "new normal," as the most restrictive public-health measures had been lifted. However, the effects of the pandemic remained evident. Children, youth, families, and even members of the staff team were navigating significant challenges within their homes and communities. These shared experiences often strengthened the team's capacity to empathize with and connect meaningfully with the people they served.

Several interconnected themes emerged through the community-based research and continued to shape the Project throughout its implementation. Mental health and social wellbeing were among the most significant concerns. Children, youth, and families continued to navigate anxiety, stress, social isolation, family conflict, emotional-regulation difficulties, and challenges within interpersonal relationships. Young people described symptoms of anxiety, including social anxiety, school-related worries, and panic. As youth became more comfortable sharing their experiences, they also began identifying differences in how they were treated within schools, describing experiences of disconnection from teachers and peers, isolation, racism, and a sense that they did not fully belong within their educational environments.

Family instability was deeply connected to these mental-health concerns. Families experienced significant conflict, ranging from couple and co-parenting difficulties to intimate partner violence. At times, police and child-welfare services became involved, and some parents faced criminal charges related to domestic violence. These experiences dramatically altered family structures, leaving children and youth to adapt to separation, changes in caregiving arrangements, new residences, changing relationships with parents,

and other significant transitions. The complexity of these experiences reinforced the need for interventions that extended beyond conventional Eurocentric models of individual treatment and considered the family, community, culture, and broader systems surrounding the child.

Cultural identity, racism, and belonging were therefore inseparable from discussions of wellbeing. Participants consistently identified the importance of culturally affirming environments, positive racial identity, representation, and opportunities to connect with Black professionals, mentors, peers, and community members. Experiences of anti-Black racism and other forms of discrimination reinforced the need for culturally responsive interventions, advocacy, and spaces where participants could see their identities reflected and affirmed.

Housing and economic insecurity further intensified many of these challenges. Families experienced homelessness, rising housing costs, housing instability, and racism within their communities and housing environments. Some families lived in temporary rental accommodations or motels for extended periods. Changes in residence often resulted in changes in children's schools, peer relationships, neighbourhoods, and access to familiar supports. These disruptions were compounded by financial pressures, difficult workplace environments, underemployment, unemployment, and reductions in household income.

The families served through the project were complex, interconnected, and multilayered. Many parents were actively seeking tools to create greater stability within their families. Women leaving difficult or unsafe relationships described wanting to rebuild their lives, pursue new careers, strengthen their households, and establish security for their children. Men shared challenges within relationships with partners, family members, and children, and expressed a desire to restore stability and strengthen their family connections. Families were also navigating significant grief and loss associated with immigration, suicide, criminalization, family separation, and premature death. In many households, caregiving extended well beyond traditional parent-child relationships. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, kin, and other caregivers were raising nieces, nephews, grandchildren, younger siblings, and other children within their extended families.

Within this context, parenting support was not simply about teaching parenting techniques. Parents and caregivers sought practical tools, supportive relationships, opportunities for shared learning, and guidance as they navigated education, child welfare, mental-health systems, family conflict, racism, and significant life transitions. Families wanted services that could respond to the realities of their lives while recognizing their strengths, cultural knowledge, relationships, and existing capacities.

Young people similarly expressed considerable uncertainty about their futures. Some described having spent several years within disrupted educational environments with limited opportunities to build meaningful relationships with adults and teachers, participate in school-based leadership, gain employment experience, or develop a clear understanding of how to transition into adulthood. Youth unemployment was a significant concern within



the community, particularly for Black youth, and young people repeatedly expressed a strong desire for meaningful employment opportunities.

These economic and developmental concerns intersected with emerging risks affecting vulnerable youth. The Project encountered concerns related to human trafficking, grooming, exploitation, and the recruitment of children and youth into criminalized activities. Young people as young as nine years of age were reportedly encountering older individuals attempting to groom them for drug distribution and other forms of criminalized behaviour. These experiences reinforced the importance of early intervention, trusted relationships, community-based mentorship, prevention, and creating meaningful alternatives for young people.

The availability of safe community spaces emerged as a significant concern. Young people described some existing youth spaces as unsafe or unwelcoming. They spoke about feeling hypersurveilled, experiencing conflict or assault from other youth, and participating in environments where their identities and cultures were not affirmed. In response to these concerns, DFCC developed a youth lounge intended to provide a safer and more affirming environment for young people. Across the Project, participants consistently emphasized the importance of trusted adults, supportive peers, culturally affirming environments, and programs that were financially and practically accessible. Youth also expressed preferences for interactive programming, individualized mentorship, and a combination of virtual and in-person opportunities.

Taken together, these experiences demonstrated that mental health, cultural identity, racism, education, employment, housing, family relationships, community safety, and economic circumstances could not be addressed as separate issues. Each influenced the others. The needs identified by children, youth, parents, and caregivers reinforced the importance of a holistic approach that understood individuals within the context of their families, communities, cultures, environments, and the broader systems shaping their everyday lives.

2.5. Project Impact and Participant Experiences

The Project developed a framework for community-based practice that demonstrated the potential to be adapted, strengthened, and replicated across different settings. The Project consistently brought together culturally responsive and trauma-informed care, Africentric and Indigenous knowledge, community voice, youth leadership, family engagement, mentorship, clinical support, and reciprocal learning. The scale of this work was significant.

The Project reached more than 5,000 community members and developed more than 100 partnership relationships across schools, post-secondary institutions, community organizations, municipalities, health and social services, Black-led organizations, businesses, professionals, and cultural networks. This reach was particularly meaningful given that the Project was delivered with substantially fewer resources and infrastructure than many mainstream institutions. The experience demonstrated what can be achieved when resources are combined with strong community relationships, cultural knowledge, flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to respond directly to what families and young people identify as important.

Yet, the impact of the project is perhaps best understood not through numbers, but through the stories that accumulated across four years. It was seen in a young Black girl who entered a school-based girls' group describing herself as shy and without many close friendships. Over time, she became more social, developed friendships with girls in other classes, and described feeling a greater sense of support among her peers. It was reflected in girls who described their group as one of the few spaces in school where they could speak openly about what was happening in their lives without being dismissed or perceived as disruptive. These spaces became places where youth could talk about racism, bullying, relationships, self-esteem, mental health, and the pressures they were carrying while learning that their experiences and voices mattered.

The impact was seen in boys who entered sport-based programming to box or play basketball and found something larger than recreation. Through consistent relationships, guided reflection, discipline, teamwork, and mentorship, youth developed confidence, emotional regulation, accountability, and connection. Within one intergenerational basketball initiative, some young people began referring to adult mentors as their "big brothers," illustrating how a recreational activity could evolve into a meaningful network of supportive relationships. Other boys described sport as a positive outlet for stress and valued having a reliable place to be active, connect with others, and receive guidance.

The impact was seen when youth who initially came to participate began to lead. Young people facilitated activities, mentored younger participants, contributed to program design, planned community initiatives, served on the Youth Advisory Council, volunteered at events, and developed their own community projects. In one example, a young person who initially volunteered at a community wellness fair later interviewed for a paid summer position—illustrating the developmental pathway Kujenga sought to create from participation, to volunteering,



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to leadership, and ultimately to employment.

It was also visible in the relationships created between generations. Through the Mzee initiative, Elders shared stories about migration, racism, parenting, resilience, cultural transition, and community life. Young people listened, asked questions, conducted interviews, and began to understand Elders not simply as older community members, but as knowledge keepers whose experiences carried lessons for the next generation. At the same time, Elders were provided opportunities to have their experiences documented, respected, and incorporated into contemporary community programming.

At the community level, Kujenga demonstrated how quickly an initiative could expand when people felt that the work belonged to them. Youth conferences grew into large gatherings of hundreds of young people. Wellness fairs brought families, service providers, businesses, cultural practitioners, facilitators, and community leaders together in shared spaces. Schools invited programs into their buildings, post-secondary students completed placements within the organizations, community professionals contributed their expertise, and new relationships created opportunities that neither organization could have generated independently.

The team also carried these stories with them. Staff regularly came together to discuss participants' progress, share moments that had affected them personally, reflect on what they were learning, and consider how programs should change in response. The work was therefore reciprocal. Team members brought professional and cultural knowledge into the community, but they were also changed by the relationships, stories, challenges, and wisdom of the people they served.

The Project demonstrated that culturally responsive community practice can be simultaneously therapeutic, educational, preventative, developmental, and relational. When children, youth, families, Elders, professionals, schools, organizations, and community members are understood as contributors to a shared process rather than separate service recipients and providers, the reach of an intervention can extend far beyond an individual program. The project formulated a framework of practice that can continue to inform future programming: listen to the community, recognize cultural and lived knowledge as expertise, build trusted relationships, create accessible and affirming spaces, respond flexibly to emerging needs, invest in young people as leaders, and understand healing as something that occurs within individuals, families, relationships, and communities together.

2.6. Partnerships and Community Capacity

At present, DFCC and Ifarada have collectively emerged as two of the region's strongest Black-led, Black-serving, and Black-focused organizations. Their growth has not only been reflected in the expansion of programs and services, but also in their increasing recognition as organizations capable of developing innovative, culturally responsive solutions for the broader Durham Region community. Four years ago, both organizations had considerably less access to governance spaces, governmental affairs, children and youth planning

tables, and broader systems of care. Today, their leadership and expertise are represented across numerous forums where decisions affecting children, youth, families, and communities are discussed and shaped.

Partnership development was therefore not simply an operational component of Kujenga; it became an important strategy for organizational sustainability, systems influence, and community representation. Relationships developed through the Project supported access to schools and community spaces, professional expertise, referrals, program resources, youth mentorship, student placements, collaborative learning, and opportunities to participate in regional and provincial initiatives. These relationships also strengthened connections among organizations serving Black and racialized communities and created pathways for Ifarada and DFCC to contribute directly to discussions about community wellbeing, service delivery, public policy, education, and systems change.

This growth is particularly significant within a broader context in which, Black-led organizations often encounter systemic barriers to funding, recognition, organizational development, and participation in decision-making spaces. Black-led organizations are subjected to assumptions that they cannot collaborate effectively with one another, that their mandates are too similar or competitive, or that culturally specific organizations are capable of serving only narrowly defined populations.

The partnership demonstrated that two Black-led organizations could work collaboratively while maintaining their distinct identities, areas of expertise, and approaches to service. Rather than viewing similarity as competition, the organizations were able to identify complementary strengths, share knowledge, respond to community needs, and create a broader continuum of support. This collaborative approach increased reach and reinforced the principle that culturally responsive services are not beneficial only to Black communities. The values underlying the work—strong parenting, healthy children, safe families, belonging, community connection, emotional wellbeing, and access to trusted support—are beneficial to all families and communities.

Over the course of the Project, these relationships also increased the visibility and credibility of both organizations within systems that had historically offered limited opportunities for their participation. Ifarada and DFCC leaders developed relationships with municipal, provincial, and federal partners, funders, educators, community agencies, service providers, and institutional leaders. Over time, these relationships became increasingly familiar and reciprocal. Organizational leaders were no longer entering spaces as unknown community representatives; they were recognized by name, invited to contribute their expertise, and increasingly regarded as trusted voices on issues affecting Black children, youth, families, and the broader community.

Relationships with public and Catholic school systems became particularly significant. What initially began as individual program opportunities developed into longstanding relationships with schools, administrators, educators, Graduation Coaches for Black Students, and other school-based partners. In several schools, programs were offered

throughout the academic year rather than as isolated or one-time activities. These sustained relationships enabled facilitators to become trusted adults within school communities and created important bridges between students, educators, families, and community-based service providers. They also provided opportunities for school staff to better understand the experiences of Black and racialized students and for community facilitators to identify needs that might not have been visible through traditional educational structures.

The organizations also gained opportunities to participate in planning tables, advisory groups, community consultations, and cross-sector initiatives addressing a wide range of issues, including community safety and wellbeing, acute community response, child and youth services, education, regional programming, family wellbeing, public policy, and other emerging community concerns. Participation in these spaces allowed Ifarada and DFCC to contribute perspectives grounded in direct relationships with children, youth, parents, caregivers, Elders, and community members.

This representation mattered. Community and systems planning can easily become disconnected from the lived experiences of the people most affected by policies and services. Through Kujenga, Ifarada and DFCC were able to bring forward youth-focused, family-centred, culturally informed, and community-based perspectives that are not always adequately represented within mainstream systems. Their participation helped create space for conversations about racism, cultural identity, accessibility, family relationships, mental health, community safety, economic insecurity, and the strengths that exist within Black and racialized communities.

Ultimately, the partnership demonstrated that community-based organizations can move beyond being viewed solely as service-delivery agencies. Through sustained relationships, credible practice, community trust, and demonstrated outcomes, they can become contributors to systems planning, policy discussions, professional learning, and regional decision-making. The Kujenga Project helped create that shift for both DFCC and Ifarada—from organizations working within the community to organizations increasingly helping to shape how the broader community understands and responds to the needs of children, youth, and families.

2.7. Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

The implementation of Kujenga was shaped by organizational growth, changing community needs, staffing transitions, financial pressures, and the increasing complexity of the circumstances experienced by children, youth, and families. These realities required flexibility, persistence, collaboration, and a willingness to continually adapt programs rather than assume that one model of service delivery would meet every need.
One of the most significant lessons was that sustainable community work requires sustainable and responsive funding. At times, organizational leaders and staff encountered budget restrictions that created additional pressure as they worked to respond to increasing and increasingly complex community needs. The staff teams became resourceful,

cultivating in-kind partnerships, shared resources, community spaces, professional expertise, and other forms of support to help address funding gaps.

Beyond the Kujenga program funding, both organizations also experienced broader financial pressures that required them to shift programming to respond to alternative needs and, at times, reduce staffing. These experiences reinforced an important lesson: funding opportunities must remain consistent and responsive to the needs of the community. When community needs evolve or increase, organizations require the flexibility and resources to adjust their services while maintaining the staff, relationships, and programs that communities depend upon.

The Project also highlighted the challenges of recruiting and retaining skilled staff within community-based organizations. The work required professionals who could understand trauma, child and youth development, family systems, anti-Black racism, cultural identity, community practice, and complex systems while also developing trusting relationships with participants. Yet grassroots organizations must often compete for these professionals while operating with significantly fewer resources and lower wage structures than larger institutions. Staff transitions demonstrated how easily relationships and program continuity can be disrupted when organizations are unable to provide the compensation, stability, and long-term employment opportunities that skilled community practitioners deserve. Competing demands affected participants as well. Youth balanced school, employment, transportation, mental-health concerns, family responsibilities, and other commitments. Parents were often managing employment, caregiving, financial pressures, court involvement, child-welfare concerns, housing instability, and multiple service systems simultaneously. Attendance was therefore not always a reflection of interest or commitment. Kujenga learned the importance of flexible scheduling, repeated opportunities for engagement, transportation and practical supports, multiple methods of communication, and maintaining relationships even when participation was inconsistent.

The complexity of participants' experiences also demonstrated that programs could not remain narrowly focused. A young person entering a leadership program might also need mental-health support, employment assistance, transportation, mentorship, or help navigating family conflict. A parent attending a workshop might disclose housing insecurity, intimate partner violence, concerns about their child's school, or difficulties accessing mental-health services. Effective community practice therefore required teams to understand the person beyond the program in which they were enrolled and to respond through collaboration, referrals, advocacy, and continuity of care.

Another important lesson concerned the importance of consistency. Youth repeatedly demonstrated that trust developed over time. Programs became more meaningful as facilitators returned week after week, learned participants' names, remembered their experiences, followed up on previous conversations, and demonstrated that they would continue to show up. The same was true for families and community partners. Relationship-based practice could not be rushed.



Youth wanted more consistent individualized mentorship, clearer communication, regular follow-up, additional in-person opportunities, and programming that was interactive and practical. They valued opportunities to talk, move, create, play sports, make art, eat together, learn from mentors, and apply what they had learned. The strongest engagement frequently occurred when programming moved beyond traditional presentation formats and created opportunities for relationship, participation, and shared experience.

Against this backdrop, one of Kujenga's greatest successes was the development of its staff and organizational culture. Team members participated in training, supervision, consultation, case discussions, program planning, and ongoing reflective practice. Regular supervision created opportunities to consider complex situations, strengthen professional skills, discuss cultural and ethical considerations, and support staff carrying emotionally demanding work. Team meetings also created spaces to share success stories, acknowledge challenges, celebrate participant progress, and reflect on how the work was affecting team members themselves.

This supportive culture became particularly important because many staff members were themselves connected to the communities being served. They understood some of the experiences participants described because they had encountered similar concerns within their own families, communities, educational systems, workplaces, or cultural experiences. Professional expertise and lived understanding could therefore coexist. The Project demonstrated the value of investing not only in programs, but in the people responsible for building and sustaining the relationships on which those programs depended.

Large community gatherings demonstrated what was possible when these relationships came together. Tallawah Youth Conferences, Family Wellness Fairs, youth showcases, cultural activities, retreats, wellness events, and other gatherings created spaces where hundreds of people could come together not because they were experiencing a crisis, but because they belonged to a community. These events combined learning, recreation, culture, food, mentorship, celebration, networking, and access to resources. They provided opportunities for families to meet service providers differently, for youth to encounter Black professionals and leaders, and for organizations and community members to build relationships outside traditional service environments.

The project also created tangible pathways for young people to move from receiving services to contributing to their communities. Youth participated as advisory members,

volunteers, mentors, program assistants, community-project leaders, interns, and paid employees. Some young people began by attending programs or volunteering and later assumed greater leadership responsibilities or obtained paid employment. Paid youth positions and summer employment opportunities provided practical work experience while allowing young people to contribute directly to programs serving their peers and communities.

The Project also demonstrated the power of giving young people meaningful responsibility. Youth helped design conferences, identify program topics, develop outreach strategies, mentor younger participants, facilitate activities, create community projects, and advise the organizations on what young people needed. Their contributions reinforced an important lesson of Kujenga: young people did not need to wait until adulthood to become leaders. When provided with resources, mentorship, trust, and meaningful opportunities, they were already capable of shaping their communities.

Perhaps the strongest measure of success was the community that developed around the Project. Children found spaces where they could speak. Young people developed friendships and relationships with mentors. Parents found people who understood the complexity of their families. Elders shared knowledge that might otherwise have remained undocumented. Students developed professional skills. Staff grew as practitioners. Schools developed relationships with community organizations. Community partners began working together in new ways.

Kujenga did not eliminate the structural challenges facing Black and racialized families, nor did it resolve the sustainability challenges confronting grassroots organizations. What it demonstrated was that significant impact is possible when culturally responsive practice, skilled staff, community knowledge, sustained relationships, and opportunities for meaningful participation are brought together. The Project's successes and challenges ultimately point to the same conclusion: strong communities are built through investment in people, relationships, and the organizations that communities already trust.

2.8. Reflections and Project Legacy

Perhaps the most meaningful aspect of Kujenga's four-year journey has been witnessing what children, youth, families, staff, and community members were able to build together. At its foundation, Kujenga means to build. Over four years, the Project worked to build stronger families, confidence and resilience, cultural pride, community relationships, leadership opportunities, and pathways for children and young people to shape their own futures. It also built knowledge—about what communities need, what supports meaningful engagement, where systemic barriers remain, and what becomes possible when culturally grounded organizations are resourced to work alongside the communities they serve. This final evaluation brings together four years of program implementation, community-based research, participant consultation, administrative data, and ongoing evaluation to examine the Project's achievements, outcomes, challenges, lessons learned, and broader contributions.

The evaluation draws upon program and activity reports, participation and demographic data, pre- and post-program surveys, participant feedback, focus groups and youth consultations, testimonials and client stories, facilitator observations, assessments, advisory discussions, and relevant academic literature. Quantitative information is considered alongside qualitative findings to provide a fuller understanding of both the scale of the Project and the experiences behind the numbers.

The accompanying literature review situates these findings within the broader experiences of Black children, youth, and families following the COVID-19 pandemic, including the intersecting effects of anti-Black racism, social isolation, educational disruption, economic inequality, family stress, and barriers to culturally responsive services. It also considers protective factors such as cultural identity, family and community relationships, mentorship, social support, resilience, and belonging.

Together, these sources provide an opportunity not simply to determine what Kujenga delivered, but to understand what was learned through four years of working alongside Black and racialized children, youth, families, and communities—and how that knowledge can inform the work that follows.



Complied and Prepared by: Nicole Perryman, Executive Director, Ifarada: Centre for Excellence. Featured photos were taken at the 2026 Tallawah Youth Conference by Keane Photography and Teeography

3. Mwongozo: The Principles That Guided Kujenga.

3.1. Literature Review: The Impact of COVID-19 and Anti-Black Racism on Wellbeing of Black Youth and Family

Written by Danielle David

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the social, emotional and mental wellness of youth and families across Canada. These effects, however, were not experienced by all equally. Black families experienced the pandemic alongside experiences of anti-back racism, police violence, socio-economic vulnerabilities and unequal access to health care (Audet et al, 2022; Mensa & Williams, 2022). Rather than creating these inequities, the pandemic was shown to exacerbate and intensity structural conditions that were already affecting Black communities (Lee et al., 2021; Mensah & Williams, 2022; Whitley et al., 2021). In the early days of COVID-19, following the high-profile case of the murder of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement created a heightened awareness of racial identity within black youth (Edwards, 2025; Osman et al., 2025). When evaluating programs specifically designed to support black you and families, it is important to acknowledge these intersecting pieces.

Although black individuals were at higher risk of contracting COVID-19, the literature suggests that the effects of the pandemic extend to other areas of life, including mental wellness, disruptions to education, family functioning, social relationships, and cultural connection. The research also shows that family, peer support, cultural identity and other opportunities for connection are important protective factors (Audet et al., 2022; Edwards, 2025; Lee et al., 2021; Whitley et al, 2021).

This literature review aims to examine the following: child and youth functioning post COVID-19, the intersection between the pandemic, anti-Black racism and the BLM movement and how parents are functioning, raising their families during this time. These areas help to provide important context for the program outcomes related to social and mental wellness, cultural pride, preparedness for adulthood, parenting confidence, family capacity and organizational partnerships.

COVID-19 and Youth Functioning

The year 2020 brought along the COVID-19 pandemic, which created significant disruptions to the developmental environments in which children and youth learn, socialize and establish identities. School closures, social distancing, reduced access to recreation and interruptions to community-based services, altered many routines and relationships that typically occur to support adolescence. Whitley et al. (2021) argue that vulnerable children and youth were particularly affected because the pandemic interacted with pre-existing social educational and economic inequalities. This is particularly relevant to black youth and families as racial marginalization can often intersect with socioeconomic disadvantage. Whitley et al. (2021), discuss how chronic exposure to racism and marginalization can exacerbate inequalities in children's social and health experiences. Children and youth who lacked adequate education, technology, financial and social

support were more likely to have negative experiences throughout the pandemic. These impacts included increased absenteeism, poorer math and literacy outcomes and concerns for longer term impacts such as school dropout and vocational attainment.

The pandemic also affected children's social and emotional development. Lee et al. (2021) examined the experiences of families from marginalized communities in Kingston Ontario and found that the loss of structure and routine was a major challenge for children and families. Social distancing reduced the ability to interact with peers and participate in activities that promote social, emotional and cognitive development. They also found that the restriction on cultural gatherings and ceremonies made it difficult for families to maintain their cultural identities and spiritual practices. They also demonstrate that the pandemic did not affect all families in the same way. Some families reported increased conflict and stress, while others experienced increased family bonding. In the same vein, some children experienced improved wellness during times of school closure. These findings challenge that COVID-19 was universally harmful and suggest that their experiences were shaped by their current environment and resources available to them. These findings have direct implications for programs seeking to improve youth social and mental wellness and increase cultural pride. If the pandemic disrupted relationships, routines, education and cultural connections, interventions that intentionally rebuild these areas can contribute to wellness and resilience. Programs that provide opportunities for social connection, cultural affirmation and supportive relationships may address these disruptions that intensified for some during the pandemic.

Anti-Black Racism and Black Youth Mental Health

The experiences of Black youth during the pandemic must also be understood within the context of anti-black racism. Mensah and Williams (2022) demonstrate that COVID-19 intersected with existing racial and socioeconomic inequalities in Canada. Black communities were disproportionately represented in frontline employment, lower-income households and crowded housing conditions. These factors created greater exposure to the virus, as they were limited from maintaining physical distancing measures. This perspective is important because it demonstrates the constraints of the social environment in which they live. Therefore, supporting Black youth and families, requires attention not only to individual coping skills but also to anti-black racism, socioeconomic inequality and access to resources.

The pandemic occurred alongside a period of highly visible racial violence and activism. Edwards (2025) examined the mental health and well-being of Afro-Caribbean Canadian youth and identified loneliness, isolation, self-awareness and race consciousness as important themes. The murder of George Floyd and the subsequent mobilization associated with Black Lives Matter, increased many youths' awareness of their racial identity and the realities of police violence and anti-black racism. Alongside, the isolation that came with COVID-19, this heightened awareness, had an impact on emotional and mental health.

Osman et al. (2025) describe these experiences as “dual pandemics”, emphasizing the intersection between COVID-19 and anti-Black racism. Through interviews with Black youth, the researchers identified four themes: ongoing exposure to anti-Black racism, the compounding effects of racism on mental health, high levels of stress and fear and anger and emotional fatigue related to the lack of meaningful solutions. With the increased use of social media and online presences, this led to repeated exposure to discussions and images related to racial violence, leading to significant emotional consequences. This suggests that mental wellness programming for Black youth must recognize racial stress as an important source of distress.

At the same time, the literature suggests that Black youth should not be understood solely through a deficit framework. Edwards (2025) highlights self-awareness, resilience, and agency as protective factors demonstrated by Afro-Caribbean Canadian youth during periods of crisis. Similarly, Audet et al. (2022), found that the BLM movement had positive effects on peer and family relationships, increasing solidarity, unity, resilience and empowerment. Family and peer support were also associated with greater psychological well-being. Edwards (2025) similarly emphasizes the importance of ongoing racial socialization. For an evaluation examining changes in cultural pride, the literature provides a strong rationale for measuring whether youth experience increased connection to their cultural identities and communities.

Parent Functioning and Family Well-Being

The effects of the pandemic were not limited to children and youth. Parents experienced significant changes in their responsibilities, stress levels and ability to support their children. Statistics Canada’s examination of the experiences of parents during COVID-19 found that school closures substantially altered family routines and increased parents’ responsibilities. Parents were required to navigate childcare, education, employment, and household responsibilities under conditions of uncertainty.

Lee et al. (2021) found that the pandemic contributed to increased interpersonal stress and family conflict in some households. At the same time, other families experienced increased bonding. These contrasting experiences suggest that family functioning was influenced by the current resources and circumstances available to individual households. For Black families, these pressures must be considered alongside structural inequalities. As mentioned above, Mensah and Williams (2022) demonstrate that Black families were disproportionately affected by housing and employment opportunities that increased exposure to COVID-19. Therefore, parent functioning during the pandemic cannot be separated from the structural circumstances surrounding families.

Goddard-Durant et al. (2023) further demonstrate how racial stress can shape the experiences and capacity of young, black mothers. Captured by the phrase “I don’t have the energy”, it illustrates how the demands of parenting can be compounded when simultaneously dealing with pressures related to race, gender, socioeconomic circumstances and caregiving responsibilities. Many of the young, Black mothers expressed distrust in health and social service systems, due to racist experiences in their

childhood, demonstrating the need for black health care professions and anti-racist and anti-oppressive service delivery.

When understanding parental confidence in this context, programs for black parents and families should not focus solely on a parent's ability to adapt to difficult circumstances, but to provide culturally relevant services that strengthen parents' knowledge, social support and access to resources. Parents may require not only emotional support but also practical knowledge about how to access resources, navigate systems and respond to developmental changes in their children. Parent-focused programs can therefore function as both a support and capacity building intervention. The pandemic disrupted many systems that families rely on, including schools, community organizations, healthcare services and cultural institutions. Strengthening parents' knowledge of available resources may increase their ability to advocate for their children and respond effectively to changing needs.

Implications for Ifarada Youth and Family Participation Outcomes

All together, this literature provides a strong rationale for evaluating programs serving Black youth and families through a multidimensional understanding of wellness. Social and mental wellness cannot be separated from relationships, cultural identity, family functioning and structural conditions. The pandemic created significant disruptions in each of these areas while simultaneously intensifying existing racial and socioeconomic inequalities. The literature also suggests that evaluation should avoid focusing exclusively on deficits or negative outcomes. Black youth demonstrated resilience, agency, self-awareness and the ability to build solidarity during the pandemic (Edwards, 2025; Osman et al, 2025). Family and peer relationships functioned as protective factors, while the BLM movement created opportunities for connection, empowerment and the development of racial identity (Audet et al., 2022). These findings support evaluating not only reductions in distress but also increases in strengths, cultural pride, social connection and confidence.

Increased organizational visibility and strengthened partnerships can be understood as important structural outcomes. The literature demonstrates that families' well being is influenced by access to resources and supportive environments, rather than solely individual characteristics. Strong partnerships can therefore increase an organization's capacity to connect families with appropriate services, community resources, cultural supports and opportunities.

Conclusion

The literature demonstrates that for Black communities, the effects of COVID-19 were compounded by longstanding anti-black racism and structural inequalities. Black youth experienced disruptions to education, social relationships, mental wellness and cultural connections while simultaneously navigating increased exposure to racial violence and injustice. Parents experienced increased caregiving responsibilities, disrupted routines, stress and challenges accessing culturally appropriate resources.

However, the literature also identifies important sources of resilience. Family and peer relationships, cultural identity and socialization, solidarity, empowerment and individual agency can protect against some of the negative outcomes associated with racialized stress. This suggests that effective programming for Black you and families should move beyond deficit-based approaches and instead strengthen relationships, cultural connectedness, skills and resources that support wellness.

These findings provide a strong foundation for examining changes in social and mental wellness, cultural pride, parenting confidence, youth preparedness for adulthood and parents' capacity to support their children. They also highlight the importance of examining organizational partnerships and visibility as mechanisms through which families can gain access to resources. For Black youth and families, meaningful support requires addressing the inequalities that the pandemic exposed and intensified, strengthening protective factors and creating culturally responsive environments in which youth and families can experience connection, empowerment and well-being.

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3.2. Lisilo Budi Hutendwa: Reclaiming Black Educational Futures: Abolition, Decolonization, and the Reimagining of School Spaces

Written by: Nicole Perryman

"Whatever should be done has to be done" – Kanga Swahili Proverb

I curated Ifarada Centre for Excellence carrying the weight of lived experience, committed to growth, and searching for ways to exist amidst the realities of anti-Black racism. This journey has shaped much of my life, a continuous process of learning, unlearning, and seeking transformation. As the proverb reminds us, "Whatever should be done has to be done", transformation must occur. I was raised in an anti-Black world that shaped my identity, defining how I perceived myself, and how others positioned me. From the age four, I became aware of my Blackness and the realities of anti-Black racism which resulted in an ongoing experience of isolation and a constant reminder that I was considered inferior. It was only within the safety of my home, my culture, and my community that my identity was formulated and celebrated. My parents intentionally built connections with other Black newcomers, creating opportunities for me to experience my culture and root myself in my Black identity. Visiting family in Trinidad & Tobago and the United States allowed me to immerse myself in Black identity, affirming the richness and pride I could hold in my heritage. Through their connection to Black churches, my parents also surrounded me with other Black youth many of whom were children of young Black immigrant couples as well as elders who reflected my identity and offered additional spaces for affirmation. These relationships helped shape my sense of self and offered a protective shield against the terror I often experienced in my predominantly White school. I came to realize that I existed within two worlds. A world where Whiteness was the standard, the measure by which worth was determined and where my Blackness was vilified; and another world, where the Black community nurtured and affirmed me. Moreover, my early experiences within Ontario schools reflect a larger colonial educational structure where Black identity is often erased, controlled, and disciplined under the guise of neutrality.

The Canadian education system operates as an extension of colonial violence perpetuating anti-Black racism through surveillance, discipline, and cultural erasure (Stirling-Cameron and Jefferies, 2021). It is in this system where our Black children and youth receive their education, but also their socialization. Ifarada was intended as a space to create safety, resistance and resilience for Black children, youth and families. It was a space where we envisioned healing as collaborative, communal and collective. It was a space where we could provide our youth with a space to thrive against the impact of anti-Black racism. I have learned that this work is impossible without what bell hooks describes as "radical hope." It was through this hope that Ifarada was planted, nurtured and supported to grow into a family and social services organization. Funding has been tremendous part of that hope. It has permitted the possibility to hire youth staff team, to collaborate with facilitators and community partners, and to establish an infrastructure that cultivated hope to thousands of children, youth and families.

Radical hope describes an active commitment to imagining new futures, even amid persistent racial violence. In 2023, I visited the National Museum of African American

History and Culture in Washington, D.C., where an Afrofuturism exhibit posed the question: “Imagine a world where there was no slavery!” I remember that I stood before that question, reimagining, with radical hope. This reimagining brought me to the question: What could we achieve if we focus Black emancipatory and social justice work to fully empower Black youth to imagine themselves and more broadly a world that is free of anti-Black racism. It is from this place of lived experience and critical reflection that I turn to the theoretical frameworks. Black feminist thought, decolonial theory and abolitionist pedagogy informed the Kujenga framework that guided all programs and services. For many decades, Canada’s approach to multiculturalism in practice reinforced assimilation as necessary for social harmony. This view ignored how deeply systemic anti-Black racism was embedded within the school system. Ifarada envisioned education as a site of liberation, cultural affirmation and collective healing: a way to counteract the impact of anti-Black racism and empower young people to reimagine their lives. This work insists that reclaiming Black educational futures requires the pursuit of joy, thriving, and self-determination.

Theoretical Frameworks: Grounding the Resistance

Drawing on Foucault (1980), power is not only repressive but productive, operating through surveillance, discipline, and biopower to regulate access to knowledge and legitimacy within Eurocentric curricula. Mbembe (2003) extends this through necropolitics, the power to decide who may live and who is rendered disposable. Wynter (2003) critiques the colonial redefinition of “the human,” exposing how colonialism centered the White, European male as the normative subject, while Lugones (2008) reveals how colonial structures erased gender fluidity and enforced binary systems.

Power, however, does not operate in isolation from social identity. Black feminist thought deepens this analysis by showing how race, gender, and class shape experiences of domination and resistance. The analysis challenges the assumption of Black communities as monolithic and foregrounds intersectionality as essential to understanding layered realities of oppression (Crenshaw, 1995; Collins, 2000). In education, this framework demands systems that recognize Black youth in their full humanity, honoring the complexity of their identities, histories, and experiences rather than erasing them.

To dismantle these intersecting oppressions, we must also interrogate the colonial systems that constructed racial hierarchies and knowledge itself, an intervention offered by decolonial theory. Decolonial theory further exposes how colonialism entrenched racial and epistemic hierarchies, positioning Whiteness as the standard of "humanity" (Fanon, 1952; Smith, 1999). True dismantling requires unlearning Eurocentric worldviews and re-centering Indigenous and Black knowledges. Grounded in this, decolonial methodologies including abolitionist teaching and Afrofuturism—offer critical pathways for resisting oppression and reimagining education as a site of justice (Love, 2019).

Building upon the decolonial critique, Critical Race Theory, and particularly Black Crit, centralizes race as the fundamental axis through which colonial power is sustained. Critical Race Theory, and specifically Black Crit, deepens this analysis by centering race as a primary axis through which power operates. Whiteness remains the normative standard—

the seduction, as Dei (2025) describes, that draws others toward its ideals even at the cost of their cultural identities. Yet conversations about race are often minimized, as a colleague once remarked to me: "Why do we always need to talk about race?" Such remarks obscure the truth that European colonialism constructed racial hierarchies foundational to the modern world (Fanon, 1952).

Rather than reforming colonial systems, abolitionist pedagogy demands their dismantling, pushing education toward radical reimagination and freedom. Bettina L. Love (2019) positions abolitionist teaching as an abolitionist praxis—rejecting reformist inclusion and instead demanding the dismantling of oppressive educational systems. Love calls for bold visions rooted in radical imagination, collective healing, and freedom dreaming (Dei, 2025; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021).

If abolitionist teaching clears the ground, Afrofuturism charts the path forward, offering visionary frameworks for Black thriving beyond survival. Afrofuturism complements this work, inviting Black youth to envision futures centered in creativity, resilience, and agency (Dery, 1994). Anderson and Jones (2016) extend this vision through Astro-Blackness, blending technology, Pan-Africanism, gender fluidity, and speculative science into liberation strategies. Together, abolitionist pedagogy and Afrofuturism move us beyond critique into the creation of liberatory educational spaces where Black thriving, not mere survival, becomes the foundation.

Naming the Violence: Anti-Black Racism, Surveillance, and the Limits of Inclusion
To understand how these theories help move us beyond critique toward transformative action, it is necessary to name the forms of violence that Black students continue to endure within educational systems. Anti-Black racism, defined as “policies and practices rooted in Canadian institutions that mirror and reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping and/or discrimination towards people of Black-African descent” (Benjamin, 2003, p. iii), is deeply embedded in Canadian schools. These institutions, far from neutral, operate as extensions of colonial power, where Black students are surveilled, disciplined, and erased. Drawing on Foucault’s (1975) concept of the panopticon, schools function as sites of constant surveillance, regulating Black bodies through biopower, controlling not only behavior but access to knowledge. This regulation extends to the curriculum itself. As Lopez and Jean-Marie (2021) argue, Eurocentric curricula affirm White students as knowledge holders while rendering Black and Indigenous histories invisible.

When Black histories are acknowledged, they are often reduced to deficit narratives, centering enslavement and obscuring the richness of pre-colonial African civilizations (Adichie, 2009; Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992). Schools do not simply erase Blackness, they criminalize it. Black students are disproportionately policed, suspended, and streamed into limited academic pathways (DDSB, 2024; Fearon, 2020; OCT, 2023). These practices are not isolated incidents but systemic patterns of harm that reflect and reinforce racial hierarchies (Gilmore et al., 2021). In my own work with Black youth, I have witnessed how quickly they internalize the message that their very presence must be managed, controlled, or corrected within educational spaces.

Beyond Surveillance: Racialized Discipline and the Trauma of Exclusion
Surveillance is only one dimension of harm. Black children are adultified, perceived as aggressive, and disruptive than their peers while their White counterparts are supported, contextualized, and protected (Dei, 2025; Bailey, 2017). This dynamic, rooted in the legacies of enslavement, sustains harmful narratives of Black culpability and erases Black identities within educational spaces. White students' misbehavior is contextualized and excused, while Black students are punished, suspended, and pushed out through policies like Ontario's Safe Schools Act (2001). As Wynter (2003) argues, colonial systems deny full humanity to Black students, policing their bodies, silencing their voices, and punishing their existence. Emotional responses from Black youth, such as anger, sadness, resistance—are pathologized, leading not to care but to further discipline and exclusion. These inequities have devastating emotional and psychological impacts.

Black youth experience racial trauma at individual, institutional, systemic, and intersectoral levels (Cénat, 2023). Chronic exposure to anti-Black racism manifests in symptoms akin to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation (Comas-Diaz, 2016). As Hardy (2013) describes racial oppression "lacerates the spirit, scars the soul, and punctures the psyche." In my facilitation sessions with Black youth, in counselling sessions, and personal experiences, youth describe how they encounter varied stress-related symptoms such as behaviour difficulties, voicelessness, loss of identity, anxiety, and even perfectionism as they attempt to navigate the impact of racial trauma. These personal experiences reflect broader systemic patterns of gaslighting, exclusion, and psychological injury (DeGruy, 2022; Alleyne, 2021), that really has not changed throughout the decades. Without radical intervention, this trauma does not simply wound individuals, it is transmitted across generations, embedding learned helplessness, internalized racism, and toxic shame within Black communities (Alleyne, 2021).

The Illusion of Inclusion: Why Reform Is Not Enough
While equity initiatives often promote "diversity" and "multiculturalism," they typically fail to confront the colonial logics underpinning education. Inclusion often demands assimilation requiring Black students to fit Eurocentric norms of respectability (Barnes & Motz, 2018). Even cultural expressions like hairstyles or dialects are policed as violations. Liberal multiculturalism will continuously celebrate diversity through festivals while ignoring the material realities of systemic oppression. Inclusion, without a radical transformation of systems, simply extends the reach of colonial violence (Wynter, 2003). Understanding these structures of harm reveals why reformist approaches are insufficient. True change demands more than adding Black students into White spaces. It requires dismantling colonial systems and reimagining education as a site of Black liberation, joy, and thriving. If education continues to mirror the violence of colonial systems, then liberation demands not reform, but complete reimagination rooted in Black thriving, joy, and resistance.

Toward Educational Liberation: Moving Beyond Reform to Reimagination
When I transitioned my work as a psychotherapist, I focused primarily on supporting Black youth and their families in addressing shame, trauma, and identity fragmentation while

navigating racist education, health, child welfare, and policing systems. Socio-economic status, education, or neighborhood did not shield Black youth from anti-Black racism, challenging the myth that class protects against systemic violence. Blackness continued to be weaponized, reinforcing harmful narratives from birth to death. Educators and caregivers alike must commit to decolonial, transformative practices that root liberation in abolitionist, Afrofuturist, spiritual, and ancestral frameworks. Black youth must be positioned not as problems to solve but as architects of their world (Love, 2019). True dismantling requires holding White systems accountable while also addressing how Black communities may perpetuate harm when colonial thinking is left unexamined.

We are at a critical juncture where educational systems have the capacity to respond to resistance with meaningful action; action that not only improves outcomes for Black youth but further embraces community as a driving force for change. This change must occur at the structural level: in how knowledge is disseminated, how educators are trained, and how policies are designed to protect and affirm Black students. It requires transformation at the community and school levels, cultivating environments where Black students can thrive.

Centering Black Joy, Storytelling, and Ancestral Knowledge

The she-goat does not suffer the pain of parturition when an Elder is at home-Igbo Proverb

Creating Black joy is a radical act of resistance. When my team and I curated the Tallawah Youth Conference ("small but mighty"), we envisioned a transformative space where Black youth could be seen, heard, and celebrated. We opened the conference with drumming, smudging, prayer, and libations grounding youth in ancestral connection. Black joy insists that Black children are entitled to play, creativity, cultural pride, and collective celebration, despite a system designed to replace joy with pain. Guided by Sankofa (“to go back and retrieve what was lost”), we recognize that resistance and survival are transmitted intergenerationally. As Gaines (2021) writes, “the seeds of equality and justice… grew into resistance and resilience.”

Storytelling becomes a key survival strategy, affirming Black identity and fostering healing (Hardy, 2013; Akinwale, 2022). Elders, through elder crits (Dei & Adjei, 2024), serve as pillars of intergenerational healing. Their mentorship and wisdom counteract the erasure of identity (Dei & Adjei). In my own life, my aunties' teachings helped me externalize harmful narratives and reclaim my worth, an essential reminder that healing connections between Black youth and elders must be rebuilt and nurtured. In addition to holding youth conferences, connecting youth with elders, hosting circles led by elders, creating opportunities for youth to express joy and expand their creativity, and cultivating protected community spaces for Black students are a few strategies that can begin to center Black joy.

Spirituality, Healing, and the Embodied Dimensions of Education

Sawubona - “I see you, I value you”.

Spirituality, reconnects us to land, spirit, community, and ourselves (Benjamin et al., 2010). Colonization weaponized spirituality to fracture traditions and impose control. In my practice, many Black families sought my support to "fix" the issues their children such as faced addictions, criminalization, struggles with identity, or behavioral challenges. Beneath these issues, I saw how internalized shame, a colonial legacy had fractured Black families. I turned to spirituality as a pathway toward healing supporting families to confront not just individual struggles, but the systemic roots of their pain. Drawing on African principles like ubuntu, which teaches that when one suffers, we all are affected. I am also reminded of an image that showed a community circle, and the community and surrounded themselves around an individual who was struggling in their life. The community would support their members by reminding them of their potential as a way towards healing, as opposed to shaming and confronting them for their behaviour. Rethinking how we embed healing, and spirituality would strengthen outcomes for youth who struggle in their lives.

Spirituality teaches empathy, rest, and self-compassion—countering the grind culture and capitalist exploitation that equate worth with productivity (Hersey, 2022). To rest, to heal, and to reclaim joy are not luxuries, they are revolutionary practices. Living fully as Black people means setting boundaries, prioritizing well-being, and creating spaces where we feel whole, connected, and free. It means resisting the weight of systemic violence while nourishing the spirit. As Hersey (2022) reminds us, "Imagine a world without oppression. Take more time here. Visualize softness. Breathe deep. Envision a world centered in justice. Stay here." Rest is the resistance. Hardy (2013) describes resistance as an emotional response to voicelessness and internalized shame, while Audre Lorde (1986) reminds us that self-care is an act of political resistance, a way of reclaiming one's well-being in the face of oppression (p. 97).

Afrofuturist Blueprints: Envisioning Black Thriving and Futurity

"Black liberation will be a collective one: it will not be homogeneous" (Kawaii-Bogue, 2020)

Afrofuturism offers a blueprint for reimagining education as a site of Black thriving. It positions imagination as resistance, empowering youth to see themselves as leaders, innovators, and visionaries beyond colonial constraints. To cultivate Black thriving:

- Engage youth early in critical conversations about race, anti-Blackness, and identity politics to both empower their action, and initiate the process of externalizing and developing counter narratives.
- Expand learning outside classrooms—connecting with land, museums, arts, and global histories, incorporating Black identity within the curriculum expanding from Black History Month, and inviting subject matter experts to mentor and teach students.
- Invest in curriculum centered on Black history, science, and speculative futures—moving beyond the 1400s to explore African kingdoms, the Moors, and cultural resilience.
- Foster creativity through elder circles, rest, play, and ancestral wisdom, host therapeutic programs at school, support affinity spaces, and build community amongst youth from different school programs.

- Embrace cultural wellness practices—drumming, art, storytelling—as healing-centered education.

Afrofuturism shifts the conversation from survival to radical thriving. It invites us to dream new worlds—rooted not in trauma, but in joy, connection, and limitless possibility. Centering Black thriving, imagination becomes a political tool, a refusal of colonial futures.

"You've got to make your own worlds. You've got to write yourself in" Octavia Butler (National Museum of African American History and Culture [NMAAHC] n.d.).

Strengthening Families and Communities

Our children and youth live within families that are unique, distinct, and diverse. Black families are not homogeneous: they may be multigenerational, immigrant or newcomer families, families separated across countries and continents, or families whose histories in Canada extend across generations. Despite this diversity, recurring experiences emerge across the literature. Black families may encounter the cumulative and intergenerational effects of racial stress and trauma, economic inequities, housing discrimination, unequal treatment within education and healthcare systems, and other manifestations of systemic anti-Black racism. These conditions can shape how individuals understand themselves, their relationships, their communities, and their expectations for the future (Goddard-Durant et al., 2023; Husbands et al., 2022).

Addressing these interconnected conditions therefore requires more than one intervention or one service system. It requires coordinated community responses that recognize both structural barriers and the strengths, histories, knowledge, and resources already present within Black communities. One important intervention is the creation of culturally affirming and identity-centred spaces. Cultural affirmation provides opportunities for Black youth to explore identity, history, hair, beauty, creativity, cultural traditions, community belonging, and the broader African diaspora within environments that counter deficit-based messages about Blackness. Research on racial and ethnic identity identifies cultural socialization and positive racial identity as important resilience processes that can help buffer some of the psychological effects of racism and support mental health and developmental outcomes among Black youth (Anderson et al., 2024; Neblett, 2023). Recent research examining programs specifically designed for Black youth similarly identifies safe relationships, culturally relevant programming, positive racial-ethnic identity development, critical understanding of historical and contemporary oppression, and opportunities to develop practical skills as important components of positive Black youth development (McGovern et al., 2026).

A second critical intervention is the development of consistent relationships with trusted adults, mentors, Elders, and Black professionals. Cultural activities, storytelling, identity exploration, Black history, intergenerational learning, creative expression, and opportunities to engage with Black professionals and community leaders provided youth with opportunities to experience their identities as sources of knowledge, strength, creativity, and possibility. This approach also created space to recognize the considerable diversity within Black and racialized communities while contributing to a broader understanding of the cultures and histories that form part of contemporary Canadian society. Relationships matter because young people do not develop independently of the people surrounding

them. Research on natural mentoring demonstrates that supportive relationships with non-parental adults can contribute to positive development among racially marginalized youth, including social-emotional wellbeing, racial identity, academic engagement, and educational attainment (Hurd, 2024; Hurd & Sellers, 2013; Wittrup et al., 2019). Importantly, relationship quality and consistency appear to matter; simply assigning a mentor is not equivalent to developing a trusted relationship.

For some Black families, migration has also altered traditional networks of support. Extended family members may live in different countries or on different continents, reducing access to the kinship networks that historically contributed to childcare, guidance, cultural transmission, and communal approaches to raising children. Canadian research with Black Caribbean mothers has specifically identified the loss of kin networks following migration as a significant source of stress for some families (Goddard-Durant et al., 2023). Community organizations cannot replace naturally occurring family and community relationships. They can, however, create formal pathways to connection that help young people develop relationships with mentors, Elders, professionals, peers, and community leaders while reinforcing the importance of broader social networks. These relationships can provide guidance while simultaneously creating space for youth independence, leadership, and self-determination. Our families need meaningful connection as they seek not simply to overcome adversity, but to create legacies of wellbeing, opportunity, leadership, and collective thriving for future generations.

Relationships must also be connected to skill development and tangible opportunity. Young people need opportunities to practise leadership rather than simply learn about leadership. Preparing youth for employment, strengthening financial literacy, developing digital competencies, supporting entrepreneurship, teaching project development and budgeting, creating opportunities for public speaking, and involving youth in community decision-making allow young people to move from recipients of services toward active contributors within their communities. Positive youth-development research similarly emphasizes skill-building, agency, enabling environments, social engagement, and opportunities for youth contribution (McGovern et al., 2026).

We also cannot ignore the psychological consequences of racism. Racism is not merely a social or political concern; it is associated with measurable effects on mental health and wellbeing among Black children and youth (Cénat et al., 2025; Neblett, 2023). Consequently, culturally responsive, trauma-informed mental-health services are essential. Canadian research increasingly emphasizes that mental-health services for Black communities should extend beyond conventional Euro-Western clinical approaches to include culturally affirming, holistic, empowerment-based, community-centred, anti-racist, and socially contextualized approaches to healing (Salami et al., 2026; Yohani & Devereux, 2025). Culturally responsive and trauma-informed mental-health supports created spaces where children, youth, adults, and parents could speak openly, feel heard, and receive support without judgement. Psychotherapy remained informed by established therapeutic frameworks while also creating space for Africentric and Indigenous-informed understandings of healing, relationships, community, identity, spirituality, and collective

wellbeing. Intervention could therefore include emotional regulation, trauma stabilization and processing, grief support, cognitive reframing, family-systems work, attachment-focused interventions, crisis support, and opportunities to strengthen relationships across generations.

This relational approach was particularly important for families experiencing separation or disruption. Therapeutic work sometimes involved reconnecting multigenerational families, strengthening relationships affected by immigration and geographic separation, supporting parent-child relationships, and working with families affected by child-protection or other institutional involvement. Rather than locating distress solely within one individual, the intervention considered the individual within their family, community, culture, history, and broader social environment. This approach is consistent with emerging Canadian literature emphasizing community-centred, culturally affirming, holistic, and contextually responsive mental-health care for Black populations (Yohani & Devereux, 2025).

Finally, wellbeing is multidimensional. Traditional counselling is not the only pathway through which children and youth can experience healing, connection, emotional regulation, and positive development. Physical activity, sport, movement, creativity, artistic expression, storytelling, play, cultural activities, and recreation can complement formal therapeutic interventions. A systematic review and meta-analysis found that physical-activity interventions were associated with reductions in depressive symptoms among children and adolescents, while systematic reviews of participatory arts-based programming have identified potential benefits for youth mental health, self-expression, social connection, identity, and wellbeing (Recchia et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2023).

Activities such as boxing, basketball, movement, physical games, play, cultural activities, storytelling, art, drumming, creative expression, and other experiential activities as components of youth wellbeing. These approaches provided multiple ways for young people to participate, communicate, regulate emotions, develop relationships, experience joy, and explore identity. Reimagining outcomes for Black children and youth therefore requires a broader understanding of intervention—one that recognizes that healing and development can occur in a counselling room, but can also take place on a basketball court, through art and storytelling, in conversation with an Elder, through mentorship, within family relationships, and in community spaces where young people experience themselves as valued, capable, connected, and able to contribute.

Conclusion: Reimagining Education as Liberation Work

True educational justice requires development of spaces where Black children are seen not as problems to solve but as visionaries and architects of new futures. Drawing from Black feminist thought, decolonial theory, abolitionist pedagogy, and Afrofuturism, this work calls for an educational blueprint rooted in joy, ancestral knowledge, critical imagination, and collective healing. The future of Black education lies not in survival but in thriving in spaces that nurture creativity, celebrate Black identities, honor spiritual traditions, and sustain radical hope. If we can imagine a world without slavery, as the Afrofuturism exhibit challenged me to do, then we can imagine schools that are not sites of harm, but homes for

Black genius and joy. Reclaiming Black educational futures is Afrofuturism in motion, a radical act of remembering, reimagining, and rebuilding a world where Black life, joy, and genius are the blueprint.

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3.3. Kutoka Maarifa hadi Matokeo: From Knowledge to Outcomes

Kujenga means “to build.” Every strong structure begins with a foundation, and the research reviewed here helps show what Kujenga was built on. It confirms what Black families and communities have long known: young people thrive when they are rooted in culture, held by supportive relationships and surrounded by a community that believes in them. The literature affirms the project’s commitment to culturally responsive mental health services, positive parenting, youth leadership, mentorship and belonging. The project established four objectives: strengthening parenting skills, improving youth mental health, supporting youth transitioning out of home and into adulthood, and building sustainable community partnerships. These objectives responded to the realities impacting families: anti-Black racism, social isolation, economic inequality and barriers to culturally relevant services. Yet the project’s story is not defined by those barriers. It draws on the cultural knowledge, family bonds and community strength that have always helped young people rise. This section traces how research and lived experience meet, and how both point toward the same truth: when we build together, we build to last.

Strengthening parenting skills, family relationships and access to resources

One of Kujenga’s identified goals was to strengthen parenting skills, family relationships, and access to services. Based on what emerged from the community, it was important not only to provide parents with additional parenting strategies, but also to support them in responding to concerns within their families, understanding how systems and institutions can create barriers for their children, strengthening parent-child relationships, and identifying and accessing appropriate supports.

Access to services was an important part of this approach. Black parents are not always provided with the information, tools, or relationships needed to navigate complex systems and community resources before concerns become more significant. At times, support may become available only after families encounter systems that are experienced as intrusive or crisis focused. Kujenga therefore emphasized empowering parents and caregivers to access information, relationships, resources, and culturally responsive supports earlier, with the understanding that strengthening families before challenges escalate can contribute to better outcomes for both parents and children.

Goddard-Durant et al. (2023) and Statistics Canada (2020) describe how racism, financial pressures, caregiving responsibilities, and limited institutional support can increase parental stress, particularly among Black mothers. These findings were reflected in Kujenga’s experience with families. Project reporting showed that families frequently presented with multiple and intersecting concerns rather than one isolated issue. During one reporting period, for example, 73 referrals were received, with mental health identified as the most common presenting concern, followed by school challenges, trauma and loss, family conflict, and systems involvement. This reinforced the importance of approaching parenting within the broader social, economic, relational, and institutional circumstances affecting families.

Lee et al. (2021) similarly identify family-level pressures associated with pandemic-related disruptions, while Audet et al. (2022) highlight the importance of supportive family

relationships for the wellbeing of Black young adults. Kujenga's outcomes reflected the importance of these relationships. Caregivers who participated in programming demonstrated increased confidence in supporting adolescent emotional development and communication needs. Families also showed improved communication patterns, including greater capacity for calmer and more constructive conversations during emotionally charged situations, reduced parent-teen conflict, and increased awareness of community supports and resources.

These findings support Kujenga's use of parenting workshops and webinars, parent discussion and support groups, family outreach, the Parent Handbook and Resource Binder, and community gatherings. Rather than treating parenting challenges solely as individual skill deficits, the Project acknowledged the broader conditions affecting families and created opportunities for parents to strengthen relationships with their children, discuss shared challenges, build confidence, develop practical strategies, and connect with culturally responsive resources and community supports.

The literature aligns with Kujenga's intended outcomes of increasing parenting confidence and strengthening parents' capacity to support their children through important life changes. The Project's findings further suggest that this capacity is strengthened when parents are not only provided with parenting information, but are also supported to understand systems, navigate barriers, access resources, strengthen family relationships, and advocate effectively for themselves and their children.

Improving mental health through culturally relevant, trauma-informed services

One of Kujenga's central goals was to improve mental health and wellbeing through culturally relevant, trauma-informed services. Community hesitancy to access mental-health support cannot be understood solely through the concept of stigma. For Black communities, help-seeking also exists within a much longer history of systemic oppression, racial discrimination, and experiences of being misunderstood, pathologized, dismissed, or harmed within medical, educational, and other institutional systems.

For children and youth, these experiences can begin early. A Black boy experiencing racism, exclusion, differential treatment, or repeated conflict within a school environment may begin to disengage or demonstrate behavioural concerns. If intervention focuses only on correcting the behaviour without examining what the young person has experienced, the underlying message can become: I am the problem. The young person's experience is silenced while the behaviour becomes the primary focus. Over time, these messages can influence how children understand themselves, their relationships with adults and institutions, and whether they believe that seeking support will result in being understood or further judged.

A trauma-informed approach requires a different question. Rather than asking only what a behaviour can is wrong or how be stopped, it considers what the child or young person has experienced, what meaning they have made of those experiences, and what conditions are required for safety, stabilization, healing, processing, and recovery. Within Kujenga, this

also meant recognizing that racism itself can be an ongoing source of psychological stress and trauma rather than treating racial experiences as separate from mental health.

Culturally relevant services further strengthen this approach by allowing children and youth to see their identities, histories, families, and communities reflected within the helping relationship. A critical race lens supports practitioners in examining how racial trauma, anti-Black racism, social determinants of health, institutional responses, and unequal access to resources can influence children's and youths' emotional wellbeing. The objective is not simply to make conventional services more culturally appealing, but to understand mental health within the social and cultural environments in which young people actually live.

Edwards (2025) and Osman et al. (2025) demonstrate that Black youths' mental health cannot be separated from anti-Black racism, racialized social experiences, and the psychological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both identify the compounding effects of social isolation, racial stress, and exposure to racial injustice. Goddard-Durant et al. (2023) similarly document the emotional exhaustion associated with navigating racism alongside inadequate social supports.

These findings were reflected in Kujenga's experience. Mental health was one of the most common presenting concerns among families accessing support, alongside school challenges, trauma and loss, family conflict, and systems involvement. This pattern reinforced that children and families were rarely experiencing mental-health concerns in isolation; emotional wellbeing frequently intersected with relationships, education, trauma, racism, family circumstances, and interactions with institutions.

Kujenga responded through therapeutic groups, counselling and psychotherapy, family outreach, mentorship, school-based programs, culturally grounded activities, and trauma-informed staff development. Programming incorporated mindfulness, journaling, grounding, creative expression, physical activity, group circles, conflict resolution, identity exploration, healthy boundaries, and emotional-regulation strategies. Youth reported valuing spaces where they could speak openly, feel heard, build relationships, and receive support without judgment. Project reporting also documented growth in emotional awareness, coping strategies, confidence, communication, peer connection, cultural pride, and belonging.

The Project also demonstrated that culturally responsive mental-health support did not always need to occur within a traditional counselling room. School groups, girls' and boys' programs, sport, art, mentorship, cultural programming, and community spaces became important entry points for emotional support and relationship-building. In the Adinkrahene Boys Boxing Program, for example, youth described the structured program as a positive outlet for stress, while mentorship and guided reflection supported emotional regulation, responsibility, confidence, and connection. In girls' programming, participants used journaling, mindfulness, breathing, grounding, creative expression, and peer discussion to explore emotions, identity, self-care, and relationships.

These outcomes reinforce the research suggesting that effective mental-health interventions for Black children and youth must extend beyond symptom reduction. Kujenga's approach sought to reduce stress and anxiety while also creating emotional

safety, strengthening coping and regulation skills, affirming racial and cultural identity, building trusted relationships, and helping young people understand that their responses cannot always be separated from the environments and systems around them.

The literature and Project findings therefore support a model of mental-health care in which Black children and youth are not required to separate their psychological wellbeing from their experiences of race, culture, family, school, and community. Culturally relevant, trauma-informed practice creates space for young people to be seen more fully—not simply through their behaviours or presenting concerns, but through their experiences, strengths, identities, relationships, and capacity for healing.

Supporting youth leadership, mentorship and transitions into adulthood

Whitley et al. (2021) identify educational inequalities and the heightened vulnerability experienced by marginalized children and youth during pandemic-related school disruptions. Mensah and Williams (2022) further demonstrate that structural racism and socioeconomic inequality influence the opportunities, resources, and outcomes available to Black communities. These structural conditions are particularly relevant during adolescence and emerging adulthood, when young people are expected to make significant decisions regarding education, employment, finances, relationships, independence, and their future while often navigating systems in which opportunities are not distributed equitably.

Preparation for adulthood therefore extends beyond individual motivation or conventional employment readiness. Young people require opportunities to develop practical skills, trusted relationships, professional and community networks, exposure to different career and educational pathways, and adults who can provide guidance as they navigate structural barriers. Research on mentoring similarly demonstrates that supportive relationships with non-parental adults can contribute to academic engagement, social-emotional development, racial identity, and positive developmental outcomes among Black youth (Hurd, 2024; Hurd & Sellers, 2013). Positive youth-development literature further emphasizes that young people benefit when programs create opportunities for agency, skill development, meaningful participation, relationships, and contribution to their communities (McGovern et al., 2026).

These findings provided an important rationale for Kujenga's youth transition programs, leadership workshops, mentorship, entrepreneurship programming, civic engagement activities, volunteer opportunities, professional networking, and relationships with community business owners and other professionals. Across the Project, youth participated across transitional youth programming, mentorship, professional partnership and networking activities, and life-coaching programs. Programming included Youth In Biz, Young Scholars, Youth Corner, Youth Leadership activities, entrepreneurship workshops, financial literacy, employment preparation, public speaking, leadership development, cultural mentorship, and one-to-one coaching.

Importantly, these programs focused on more than discussing future possibilities. Youth were given opportunities to practise the skills required to pursue them. For example, in the

Youth In Biz Entrepreneurship Program, youth participated in a four-week entrepreneurship program delivered across school sites. Youth explored marketing, branding, business operations, ethics, financing, budgeting, product development, app development, customer needs, market trends, and revenue strategies. Participants worked collaboratively to develop app concepts, determine target audiences and services, create branding and monetization strategies, and present their ideas through Shark Tank-style pitches. Project reporting identified increased understanding of business fundamentals, stronger confidence in presenting ideas publicly, improved teamwork and communication, and greater awareness of entrepreneurship as a possible career pathway.

Leadership development was also intentionally embedded within everyday programming. Youth were not always positioned as the youngest person in the room or as recipients of adult instruction. In an in-school program, for example, older youth were paired with younger participants and supported them in learning basketball, baseball, badminton, and volleyball. The older youth reflected on the patience, communication, encouragement, and responsibility required to mentor someone else. Participants also assumed responsibility for leading games and mindfulness activities. In this context, leadership became something youth could experience and practise rather than simply a concept discussed in a workshop.

Programs for boys similarly connected leadership to skills needed for adolescence and adulthood. The newly developed in-school boys program addressed trust-building, communication, accountability, emotional regulation, peer influence, high-school preparation, healthy masculinity, discipline, consistency, peer support, and future visioning. The Ifarada named Adinkrahene Boys Boxing Program combined sport with mentorship and guided reflection, connecting discipline and decision-making within boxing to school, relationships, personal responsibility, and everyday choices. These activities recognized that preparation for adulthood also includes learning how to regulate emotions, maintain relationships, make decisions, manage peer pressure, take responsibility, and understand one’s role within a community.

Kujenga also created intergenerational pathways to leadership. Through the Mzee Project and Elder Circle activities, youth were exposed to Elders’ experiences of migration, cultural transition, racism, parenting, resilience, and community adaptation. Storytelling was used not simply to preserve history, but as a form of mentorship and community education. Elders provided young people with opportunities to understand how previous generations navigated adversity, maintained cultural identity, built families, and contributed to community life. This supported cultural pride, empathy, civic awareness, and a stronger understanding of leadership as an intergenerational responsibility.

Another significant component was youth voice in organizational and community decision-making. Kujenga’s Youth Advisory Committee created a formal structure through which young people could influence programming rather than only participate in activities that adults had already designed. Youth Advisory members contributed directly to the planning of the Tallawah Youth Conference by recommending themes, booklet content, participant items, décor, interactive activities, networking opportunities, and youth-friendly engagement strategies. Youth also helped identify outreach approaches through schools, social media,

libraries, churches, newsletters, flyers, and peer networks. Their discussions extended beyond event planning to issues affecting their communities, including unemployment, financial barriers, missing Black boys, and the need for greater investment in Black communities.

The Tallawah Youth Conference demonstrated how these elements could be brought together at a larger scale. The 2026 conference, Kujitambua: Know Yourself, Reimagine Your Future, brought together youth from across the GTA. Its framework centred on Knowledge of Self, Knowledge of Systems, and Knowledge of Possibilities. Youth were invited to explore identity and cultural pride while also examining education, employment, housing, technology, racism, mental health, leadership, creativity, and future opportunities. In this way, future preparation was not framed simply as teaching youth how to adapt to existing systems. Young people were supported to understand themselves, critically examine the systems they would need to navigate, and imagine possibilities beyond the barriers they encountered.

Across these activities, mentorship and leadership were connected to practical competencies. Youth developed skills in financial literacy, budgeting, communication, public speaking, teamwork, conflict resolution, goal setting, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, project planning, decision-making, emotional regulation, networking, and community engagement. These competencies were taught through workshops but were also reinforced through projects, presentations, peer mentorship, recreation, advisory participation, community events, and relationships with professionals.

This distinction was important. Kujenga did not conceptualize successful transition into adulthood as simply becoming employed or completing school. Thriving required young people to have the skills and confidence to make decisions, advocate for themselves, build relationships, understand financial and institutional systems, seek support, contribute to their communities, and imagine a future in which they could exercise agency. For Black youth navigating racism and unequal access to opportunity, preparation also required opportunities to understand structural barriers without internalizing those barriers as personal failure.

Kujenga's Youth Advisory Committee, entrepreneurship and employment-readiness programming, mentor-led workshops, peer mentorship, intergenerational initiatives, youth conferences, and community leadership opportunities therefore positioned youth as contributors, decision-makers, creators, mentors, and emerging leaders, rather than only as recipients of services. This approach aligns with the Project's intended outcome that young people feel more prepared for adulthood, while also advancing a broader objective: supporting Black youth to develop the relationships, competencies, cultural grounding, networks, and opportunities necessary not simply to transition into adulthood, but to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Strengthening cultural identity, belonging and community partnerships

Audet et al. (2022) identify the importance of family and peer support for Black young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement,

demonstrating the protective role that meaningful relationships can play during periods of racial and social stress. Edwards (2025) similarly highlights the relationship between racial identity, shared cultural experiences, and the wellbeing of Afro-Caribbean Canadian youth. At the same time, Mensah and Williams (2022) demonstrate how structural inequalities can contribute to exclusion and unequal access to educational, economic, social, and community opportunities. These findings were particularly relevant to Kujenga because cultural identity and belonging were understood as components of wellbeing rather than simply cultural enrichment. Black children and youth are developing their identities while simultaneously receiving messages about Blackness from schools, media, institutions, peers, and the broader society. Within this context, creating opportunities for young people to encounter affirming representations of Black identity, history, beauty, creativity, leadership, family, and community can provide an important counterbalance to experiences of anti-Black racism, stereotyping, exclusion, and devaluation.

Kujenga therefore intentionally created culturally affirming spaces in which young people could explore what Black identity meant to them. For example, participants in one of the in-school programs explored hair, identity, beauty standards, cultural appropriation, stereotypes, self-image, and Black beauty. Youth reflected on experiences of criticism or pressure to change their appearance, created affirmations celebrating their hair, and developed skits about learning to embrace their identities. Participant feedback indicated increased knowledge of and pride in culture and heritage, with one young person specifically identifying learning about her hair and where it came from as meaningful.

The Black Students' Association (BSA) in one elementary school similarly connected cultural identity with social wellbeing and belonging. Fifteen youth participated during one reporting period, including six new participants. Activities included cultural discussions, community puzzles, affirmation shields, joy jars, journaling, goal mapping, leadership activities, and team building. Young people explored Black culture through conversations about family, community, music, food, identity, diversity, joy, and positive experiences. The intention was not only to teach cultural information, but to help youth locate themselves within a broader community and understand Black identity as connected to joy, relationships, leadership, and possibility.

Other programming broadened this approach. DFCC's Youth Corner and Culture Lab incorporated Black History Month activities, Black Excellence, food and culture, creative expression, representation, and Afrofuturism. Youth were encouraged not only to examine history but also to imagine Black futures through art, fashion, music, technology, discussion, and creative expression. Across these activities, cultural identity was connected to both remembering and imagining understanding where one comes from while developing the confidence to envision what Black communities and individual lives could become.

Intergenerational relationships were another important component of cultural belonging. Through the Mzee Project and Elder Circle activities, Elders were engaged as storytellers, cultural knowledge holders, mentors, and community leaders. Their experiences of migration, racism, cultural transition, parenting, resilience, and community adaptation

became sources of learning for younger generations. Storytelling allowed young people to understand that the experiences they encounter exist within larger histories of family, migration, resistance, adaptation, and community-building. Project reporting identified these activities as contributing to cultural pride, empathy, civic awareness, community responsibility, and a stronger understanding of belonging.

This intergenerational approach was important because cultural identity cannot be sustained only through formal curriculum. Knowledge is also transmitted through stories, relationships, food, music, memories, language, traditions, family experiences, and community gatherings. Kujenga therefore created opportunities for Elders and younger community members to occupy the same spaces, exchange knowledge, and recognize one another as contributors to community wellbeing.

Experiential activities also provided important opportunities for cultural and social connection. Across the four-year Project, many youth participated in experiential activities. Activities included visits to the Royal Ontario Museum and Art Gallery of Ontario, bowling, community parks, escape-room and mystery activities, video-game nights, youth-room activities, Cedar Park, retreats, and other community experiences. The Project also supported cultural and community events including Emancipation Day activities, Riddim Fits Cultural Arts, a Hip Hop Cultural Arts Festival, Durham Black Educators Network awards, and the BlackLit Festival. These experiences allowed young people to engage with culture, art, history, recreation, peers, and community outside of traditional service environments. In addition, through a partnership with Kids Up Front, Ifarada received tickets that created opportunities for children, youth, and families to participate in cultural, recreational, and community experiences that may otherwise have been financially inaccessible. Families were able to attend sporting events, live performances, museums, and other special events, helping to reduce barriers to participation while creating opportunities for shared family experiences, recreation, social connection, and community belonging.

Through this partnership, children, youth, and families attended events such as AFC football games, Toronto Tempo games, Toronto Raptors and Raptors 905 basketball games, Toronto Maple Leafs and Toronto Marlies hockey games, and live theatre and entertainment productions including The Outsiders, & Juliet, The Harlem Globetrotters, Some Like It Hot, and The Sound of Music. These experiences extended Kujenga's work beyond formal programming by giving families opportunities to spend time together, experience arts and recreation, access spaces they may not regularly attend, and build positive memories within the broader community.

Retreats were another example of how belonging and identity were integrated with personal development. Ifarada hosted four retreats for young women across retreats in Blue Mountain, Niagara Falls, and the Kawarthas. Activities incorporated wellness, reflection, recreation, cultural and intergenerational learning, leadership, goal setting, and preparation for life transitions. Participants were encouraged to consider their relationships

with community and Elders alongside their individual goals, reinforcing that growth and independence do not require disconnection from community.

These experiential opportunities were important because belonging develops through shared experiences as much as through formal discussion. Eating together, travelling together, participating in recreation, creating art, attending cultural events, hearing stories, celebrating accomplishments, and simply having opportunities to experience joy with peers all contributed to relationship-building. Overall, the project created opportunities for recreation, connection, relationship-building, and celebration as the Project approached closure.

Kujenga also recognized that belonging requires community infrastructure. Children and families cannot be meaningfully connected to community if organizations work in isolation. Partnerships therefore became an intervention in themselves. Ifarada and DFCC developed relationships with schools, universities, libraries, recreation facilities, Black-led organizations, youth-serving organizations, public institutions, businesses, community leaders, professionals, mentors, cultural advisors, and Elders. These relationships created spaces for programming, referrals, outreach, professional learning, mentorship, cultural activities, employment and career exposure, and community events.

School partnerships were particularly important because they allowed programming to occur where children and youth already spent much of their time. Relationships with high-needs schools and communities supported recurring youth groups, mentorship, wellness programming, cultural-identity activities, and relationship-building with educators and families. Rather than relying exclusively on young people to locate community services independently, these partnerships brought culturally responsive programming into familiar environments and supported longer-term relationships with students.

Partnerships with educational and community institutions also broadened youths' exposure to opportunities beyond their immediate environments. Relationships included Toronto Metropolitan University and Trent University Durham GTA, while partnerships with community and recreation spaces supported events, mentorship, experiential activities, and programming. The Mzee Film Project and Elder–Youth Circle created an intergenerational relationship with the Ajax Public Library, and community planning partnerships supported activities such as the Tallawah Youth Conference and Wellness Fairs.

Community gatherings brought many of these relationships together. Across the Project, youth showcase, family wellness fairs and youth conferences drew hundreds of community members into supportive spaces. These gatherings brought together cultural performances, youth-led activities, workshops, Elder circles, storytelling and fireside conversations, Black-owned businesses, community organizations, professionals, artists, cultural leaders, families, and young people. The project demonstrated intentionality toward creating spaces where community members could encounter one another, exchange knowledge, and develop relationships.

Partnership development also strengthened the broader network available to families. Participation in activities such as the Black Vendor Village, Black Health and Wellness Day,

Black Culture x Popular Culture at Toronto Metropolitan University, community events, school partnerships, advisory networks, and cross-sector planning tables increased opportunities for families to encounter culturally responsive organizations, professionals, educators, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. Project reporting identified these partnerships as strengthening referral and outreach pathways, increasing organizational visibility, deepening trust within Black and racialized communities, and expanding access to culturally responsive supports.

The significance of these partnerships extended beyond the number of organizations involved. They contributed to what could be understood as a community ecosystem of support. A young person might encounter Kujenga through a school program, meet a Black professional through a workshop, participate in a cultural event with their family, hear an Elder's story, attend an experiential activity, receive mentorship, volunteer at an event, or become involved in youth leadership. Each connection created another potential relationship through which that young person could experience belonging and access opportunity.

The literature therefore supports Kujenga's intended outcomes of increased cultural pride, improved social wellbeing, reduced isolation, and stronger community connections. The Project's experience further suggests that cultural identity and belonging are strengthened when young people have repeated opportunities to see themselves reflected positively, develop relationships with peers and trusted adults, learn from Elders, participate in cultural and recreational experiences, contribute to their communities, and access networks extending beyond a single organization.

Finally, the Project demonstrated why partnership development is central to sustainability. Maintaining culturally responsive programming beyond a specific funding period requires more than sustaining individual activities. It requires preserving the relationships, trust, referral pathways, professional networks, cultural knowledge, community spaces, and collaborative practices developed through the Project. In this sense, Kujenga's community partnerships were not simply mechanisms for delivering programs; they became part of the infrastructure through which children, youth, and families could remain connected to culture, community, resources, opportunity, and one another.

Addressing structural inequalities through community-informed programming

A consistent theme across the literature is that the challenges experienced by Black children, youth, and families cannot be adequately understood through individual behaviours, choices, or family circumstances alone. Goddard-Durant et al. (2023) and Mensah and Williams (2022) emphasize how systemic racism, economic inequality, institutional practices, and unequal access to resources influence family wellbeing and opportunity. Whitley et al. (2021) similarly demonstrate how educational vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic was shaped by broader social and economic inequalities. These findings challenge service models that locate responsibility for change exclusively within the individual while overlooking the environments and systems surrounding them.

This perspective was central to Kujenga. The Project recognized that a child experiencing difficulty at school might simultaneously be navigating racism, family stress, social isolation, mental-health concerns, financial insecurity, peer conflict, or uncertainty about the future. A parent seeking support might also be navigating housing, employment, school advocacy, child welfare, family conflict, trauma, or difficulty accessing appropriate mental-health services. Many referrals for services identified mental health as the most common presenting concern, followed by school challenges, trauma and loss, family conflict, and systems involvement. The pattern demonstrated that families frequently presented with multiple intersecting needs rather than one isolated concern.

Kujenga therefore combined direct services with outreach, family support, school-based programming, counselling, mentorship, cultural programming, systems navigation, community engagement, and partnership development. The purpose was not to suggest that a community program could eliminate structural racism or economic inequality. Rather, the approach sought to reduce some of the barriers created by these conditions, strengthen protective relationships and resources around families, support participants in navigating institutions, and ensure that programming reflected the realities community members identified.

An important component of this approach was community-informed program development. Rather than assuming that organizations already knew what children, youth, and families needed, Kujenga incorporated focus groups, advisory committees, surveys, participant feedback, testimonials, staff observations, and ongoing conversations with community members into program planning and evaluation. These consultations addressed program development, community events, youth and Elder programming, youth-identified concerns, and participants' experiences of program delivery. Focus groups were also incorporated into the development of school-based programming and the Tallawah Youth Conference.

The findings from these conversations demonstrated precisely why a structural lens was necessary. During the final youth focus group on August 13, 2026, young people identified relationships with mentors and staff, opportunities to connect with other Black and racialized youth, leadership development, workshops, practical skill-building, and feedback on their personal and community projects as meaningful aspects of the Project. At the same time, youth identified concerns related to mental health, education, financial insecurity, employment, racism, identity, social media, bullying, family relationships, loneliness, and uncertainty about the future.

Program evaluation was similarly intended to influence implementation rather than simply document participation after programs ended. Pre- and post-program surveys were collected alongside qualitative information such as testimonials and client stories, while Youth Advisory meetings provided additional feedback on youth initiatives. In early 2026, for example, the Youth Advisory Committee met on three occasions, with nine youth attending all three sessions, to contribute to Tallawah planning and year-end programming.

This reciprocal process was important because community needs changed throughout the four-year Project. Programming therefore expanded beyond some of its original formats into longer-term school groups, culturally grounded mental-health programming,

entrepreneurship, employment preparation, financial literacy, mentorship, family outreach, recreation, leadership development, cultural events, Elder engagement, and larger community gatherings. The Project increasingly demonstrated that social inclusion required multiple entry points rather than one standardized intervention.

Outreach was another mechanism for addressing unequal access. Kujenga did not rely exclusively on families independently identifying a need, locating a service, completing a referral, and entering an unfamiliar organization. Programming was delivered within elementary and secondary schools, youth hubs, recreation and community spaces, libraries, community events, and other locations where families and young people were already present. This approach increased opportunities for children and youth to encounter culturally responsive programming within familiar environments and helped organizations develop ongoing relationships with schools, educators, families, and community partners.

Systems navigation also became important because access to a resource does not necessarily mean that families know how to navigate it. Parenting and family support therefore incorporated advocacy, referral information, community resources, school concerns, child and youth mental health, co-parenting, communication, and strategies for navigating family and institutional challenges. The Parent Handbook and Resource Binder, for example, were designed to provide practical and culturally responsive information related to family wellness, advocacy, mental health, relationships, and accessing community supports.

Kujenga also recognized that responding to structural inequality required relationships beyond the two organizations delivering the Project. Cross-sector partnerships created pathways into systems and resources that a single organization could not provide independently. During one reporting period, partnership activity included schools, youth-serving networks, educational institutions, community organizations, parent and caregiver groups, intergenerational initiatives, and community wellbeing tables.

Ifarada also participated in networks such as the Durham Connect Situation Table, Strategic Advisory Group, Child and Youth Advocacy Committee, Ontario Association of Young Parent Agencies, public-affairs and equity tables, and communities of practice. These relationships created opportunities for the organization to participate in broader conversations about crisis response, young parents, child and youth wellbeing, community safety, education, and service systems.

This systems-level participation was important because community-informed programming should not require community members to repeatedly describe structural barriers without those experiences reaching institutions capable of influencing conditions. Kujenga's partnership approach created channels through which information emerging from direct work with Black children, youth, and families could inform conversations with schools, public institutions, service networks, community organizations, and planning bodies. At the same time, these partnerships expanded referral pathways and connected participants to resources, professionals, spaces, mentorship, educational opportunities, and community supports outside of Kujenga itself.

The Project nevertheless remained clear about the limits of community programming. Mentorship cannot eliminate labour-market discrimination. Financial-literacy education cannot eliminate economic inequality. Counselling cannot remove anti-Black racism from schools or institutions. Teaching a young person resilience should not require them to independently overcome structural barriers that they did not create. The role of Kujenga was therefore broader than teaching individuals how to cope. Programming sought simultaneously to strengthen individual and family capacity, increase access to supportive relationships and resources, create culturally affirming environments, support navigation and advocacy, and participate in broader community and systems relationships.

This distinction is important when considering the meaning of community-informed practice. Community voice was not used only to determine which workshops participants preferred. Young people and families identified the conditions affecting their lives—including racism, finances, employment, education, family relationships, mental health, social isolation, and belonging—and these insights shaped how the Project understood wellbeing itself. As the evaluation progressed, Kujenga increasingly recognized that these domains were interconnected and that effective programming required flexibility across mental health, culture, family support, mentorship, recreation, education, leadership, and systems navigation.

Collectively, the literature suggests that services are more responsive when they recognize structural barriers rather than attributing disparities solely to individual behaviour; affirm racial and cultural identity; strengthen family, peer, mentoring, and community relationships; create meaningful opportunities for participation and leadership; and include the perspectives of the communities they are intended to serve. Kujenga's experience further suggests that community-informed programming is most meaningful when listening produces action. Partnerships created pathways into schools, community resources, professional networks, and systems-level conversations. In this way, Kujenga moved beyond viewing community members as recipients of services and increasingly recognized them as knowledge holders, contributors, partners, and co-creators of the conditions required for children, youth, and families to thrive.

3.4. The Story of Partnerships: Building Community Through Collaboration

Through the Kujenga Youth Wellbeing Project, Ifarada partnered with the Durham Family and Cultural Centre (DFCC) to expand the reach of its services, strengthen collaboration, support joint program development, and bring together a diverse range of expertise. This partnership created opportunities to respond to the needs of Black and racialized children, youth, and families through culturally responsive programming, shared resources, and community engagement. Throughout the partnership, DFCC and Ifarada have remained committed to the project's shared goals, with its impact continuing to exceed our expectations. The project was grounded in four initial goals, alongside a commitment to developing sustainable community partnerships. Together, these goals guided our collective efforts to meet Black and racialized youth and their families where they are in their lives.

Building Relationships Across Systems and Communities

The staff team have been actively engaged in developing partnerships and fostering collaboration at organizational, regional, and provincial levels. These relationships have supported advocacy, professional development, service coordination, community engagement, and the expansion of culturally responsive programs.

At the provincial and organizational levels, the Executive Directors have worked closely with the Public Affairs Committee and Family Service Ontario, the Ontario Association of Young Parent Agencies, and the Canadian Accreditation Centre to strengthen advocacy efforts, enhance service standards, and broaden the organization's reach.

At the local level, Ifarada has continued to build meaningful relationships through participation in the Building Safer Communities Strategic Advisory Group and the Child and Youth Advocacy Centre (CYAC) network. Members of CYAC were invited to visit Ifarada's offices to develop a deeper understanding of its programs and services, fostering opportunities for stronger collaboration and coordinated support.

The Executive Directors and staff also participated in community events, including a Durham District School Board community night and the Durham Black Educator Network's annual awards ceremony. These events provided opportunities to connect with families, educators, professionals, and community partners while increasing awareness of Ifarada's services. Overall, most initiatives focused on addressing the needs of youth transitioning into and out of educational institutions, creating opportunities for knowledge sharing, collective problem-solving, and coordinated community responses. Through these activities, Ifarada strengthened cross-sector relationships with schools, community agencies, educational institutions, government services, and regional advisory networks. These partnerships supported culturally responsive programming, referrals, access to physical spaces, in-kind resources, and opportunities for youth leadership and professional development.

Ifarada and DFCC developed and strengthened relationships with a broad network of educational institutions, community organizations, government agencies, businesses,

cultural leaders, and individual professionals. The partnership records demonstrate the range of contributions made toward project delivery and community engagement. Educational institutions and school boards. Partnerships with the Durham District School Board, Durham Catholic District School Board, individual elementary and secondary schools, Durham College, Ontario Tech University, Trent University Durham GTA, Toronto Metropolitan University, York University, and other educational institutions expanded opportunities for school-based programming, youth engagement, training, and community learning. Participating schools included Ajax High School, Bowmanville High School, Eastdale Collegiate, Waverly Public School, Lester B. Pearson Public School, Dr. C.F. Cannon Public School, and St. Mark the Evangelist, among others. Schools and educational partners contributed physical spaces, expertise, resources, and connections to students and families, making services more accessible within familiar community environments.

Community organizations and social service providers. Relationships with Durham Children's Aid Society, the Child Development Institute, Durham Community Health Centre, YouthREX, Family Service Ontario, the Ontario Association of Young Parent Agencies, Peacebuilders, Luke's Place, Surrey Place, Kids Up Front, and other community organizations strengthened access to specialized knowledge, community resources, and service pathways. These relationships supported professional learning, the identification of community needs, and connections for children, youth, and families experiencing barriers to services.

Government agencies, advisory networks, and community safety partners. Participating in regional and municipal initiatives involving the Region of Durham, Durham Region Social Services, Durham Region Public Health, Durham Regional Police Services and Youth-in-Policing, Durham Connect Situation Table, the Durham Child and Youth Planning Network, and community safety and wellbeing advisory groups. These connections created opportunities for information sharing, coordinated responses, policy discussions, and collaboration around emerging community needs.

Black-led organizations, cultural partners, and community networks. Relationships with organizations and initiatives such as the C4 Collective, Canadian Black Leadership Foundation, AfriCANthology Canada/Canadian Black Literature Institute, Black Culture × Popular Culture, and Black Student Alliance networks strengthened cultural representation, knowledge sharing, and opportunities to connect with Black-led initiatives. These collaborations supported programming that reflected the identities, histories, experiences, and aspirations of Black children and youth.

Businesses, entrepreneurs, and professional facilitators. Engaging entrepreneurs, consultants, trainers, cultural practitioners, and local businesses to contribute expertise, materials, and community connections helped to facilitate opportunities for cross collaboration. Some of these relationships consisted of professionals and organizations such as A.F.I.Y.U. Enterprise, BluJai Startups, Grant Creativity Inc., Talkin' Tales, White Cedar Healing, The Get REAL Movement, and other professionals and businesses. Their

contributions expanded access to specialized knowledge and practical learning while creating opportunities for youth to engage with entrepreneurs, mentors, and professionals from diverse fields.

Community spaces and in-kind support. Partners such as the Town of Ajax, Audley Community Centre, Ajax Public Library, schools, and community facilities provided access to physical spaces and connections that supported program delivery. Across the partnership network, contributions included meeting and activity spaces, audiovisual resources, printing, supplies, snacks, transportation supports, and specialized expertise. These resources helped reduce participation barriers and extended the value of available program funding.

The Value and Impact of Partnerships

Partnerships are the foundation that transforms individual programs into sustained community impact. They extend our reach into schools, neighbourhoods, and communities that we could not access as effectively on our own. They bring culturally responsive knowledge, professional expertise, and community perspectives into program development while enabling limited financial resources to support a broader range of experiences and opportunities. Through in-kind contributions, including meeting spaces, audiovisual equipment, printing, refreshments, and transportation supports, partners helped address practical barriers that can prevent children, youth, and families from accessing services. Relationships with educators, school staff, and youth ambassadors also helped strengthen program engagement and participation.

Collaborations with organizations working in child welfare, community safety, housing, mental health, education, and social services created additional opportunities for referrals and coordinated responses to complex family and youth needs. These relationships are particularly important for families navigating multiple systems, where culturally responsive and accessible support may otherwise be difficult to obtain. Partnerships also created meaningful opportunities for youth participation and skill development. Roles such as event hosts, DJs, photographers, and program assistants enabled young people to contribute their talents while developing practical experience, portfolios, professional references, and potential pathways to paid employment.

Joint planning, shared learning, and program debriefings helped strengthen service quality and encouraged continuous improvement. Collaborative relationships also supported funding applications through shared information, evidence of community needs, and letters of support, reinforcing organizational credibility and opportunities for sustainability. Perhaps most importantly, partnerships helped build trust. For Black and racialized families who have experienced systemic barriers, exclusion, or limited access to culturally responsive services, trusted community relationships can create stronger pathways into care. By working collaboratively, Ifarada and DFCC were able to connect families with familiar institutions, culturally knowledgeable professionals, and community resources that reflected their needs and experiences. The value of these relationships extends beyond the delivery of individual programs. They contribute to a broader network of care in which

organizations share responsibility for strengthening family wellbeing, supporting youth development, fostering cultural identity, and expanding opportunities for community participation.

The Kujenga Youth Wellbeing Project demonstrates the importance of collaboration in building culturally responsive, accessible, and sustainable services for Black and racialized children, youth, and families. These connections helped expand access to programming, increase opportunities for mentorship and youth leadership, strengthen professional expertise, and support families navigating complex systems. Our experiences reinforce that effective community development is not achieved by organizations working in isolation. It requires sustained relationships, shared knowledge, mutual accountability, and a collective commitment to improving outcomes for those we serve. The relationships developed throughout its implementation represent an important part of its legacy. They provide a foundation for continued collaboration, community engagement, and the advancement of culturally responsive services.

“If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”
— African proverb



Ifarada: Centre for Excellence in partnership with Durham Family & Cultural Centre
Complied and Prepared by: Nicole Perryman, Executive Director, Ifarada: Centre for Excellence. Featured photos were taken at the 2026 Tallawah Youth Conference by Keane Photography and Teeography

4. Results

4.1. Sauti za Vijana: Focus Group Themes and Participant Voices

Over the four-year program, the project team conducted a series of focus groups that helped guide program development, define program goals and objectives, identify priority needs and concerns, and shape advocacy efforts. Young people and parents/caregivers/guardians participated actively in these focus groups throughout the project. Sessions were held in person at project sites, virtually, and within established groups (e.g., the Youth Advisory Group). Consultations included youth engagement and needs assessments, Youth Advisory Group consultations, school-based focus groups, program evaluations with summer students, conference planning, and a consultation on future programming. Youth REX collaborated on developing the focus group questions and participant surveys. The data collected informed a summary report, program development, and needs assessments. These consultations were central to the project, reflecting its guiding principle of sauti za vijana, Swahili for “voices of youth.” Through these consultations, young people noted that they thrive through trusted relationships, cultural affirmation, practical skills, and a real say in the programs built for them.

Overall findings

Across all of the consultations, five main themes emerged. Each theme was raised by participants in more than one consultation, including youth advisors, conference planners, summer students and program participants.

1. Relationships, mentorship and belonging

Participants repeatedly emphasized that meaningful relationships mattered more than access to activities alone. Supportive staff, mentors and peers, trusted adults and opportunities to be heard were described as central to their experience. Participants described Ifarada as a place where they felt welcomed, listened to and connected, and identified the relational component of programming as being as important as workshop content.

Participants also identified individualized support as the clearest area for improvement. They valued group workshops and wanted them paired with consistent one-to-one mentorship, easier contact with mentors, regular check-ins and personalized follow-up.

Examples

- Youth advisors recommended informal, sustained relationships with Elders, such as mentorship and small-group conversations, rather than relying only on presentations or panels.
- Program participants described receiving a genuine response to their ideas, rather than what felt like a "pre-made reply," as building trust.
- Summer students valued learning from experienced staff and mentors and recommended more structured mentorship, regular check-ins and clearer expectations.
- Program participants described the predictable weekly structure of meetings as helpful and asked for more frequent individual contact between sessions.

Testimonials

"The most meaningful part of Ifarada was the supportive network of staff and fellow participants made me feel connected."

"Having people who genuinely listened, encouraged me, and made me feel supported."

"The mentors, workshops, and meeting other young people were the most helpful. I enjoyed learning and sharing ideas."

"I'd like to see it focused on mentorship/organic opportunities to build a connection with an elder in the community."

"Ifarada supported me well with my goals, but more one on one support would make it even better."

"I wish it was easier to get in contact with mentors and that's about it."

2. Cultural identity, representation and intergenerational connection

Participants identified cultural identity and representation as important to their engagement. Youth valued spaces that affirm their identities, opportunities to learn about cultural heritage, and access to Black professionals, entrepreneurs, Elders and community leaders who provide mentorship and visible examples of success. Participants also named racism, negative stereotypes and limited representation as current challenges.
Intergenerational connection was part of this theme. Youth described relationships between youth and Elders as sometimes strained by stereotypes on both sides, and called for respect built on listening, understanding and accountability from both generations. They expressed interest in hearing Elders' personal experiences and learning cultural traditions and family history directly.

Examples:

- Youth advisors saw technology as an opportunity for reciprocal learning, with youth supporting Elders' technological confidence and Elders sharing historical knowledge and lived experience.
- Summer students identified Africentric principles, drumming and cultural identity training as particularly meaningful, and valued working alongside Black professionals in Black-centred community programming in Durham Region (summarized from facilitator notes).
- Conference planners appreciated Black-owned and culturally diverse vendors and asked for more direct conversation with entrepreneurs.
- Program participants described the youth leadership workshops as a place to reflect on history and themselves, and recommended year-round Black history and cultural education, a pro-Black book club and cultural community events.

Testimonials

"Youths want to be heard and understood."

"One thing that can build mutual respect is to understand our point of view."

"It's great to browse, but it would be even better if we could talk with the vendors more."

3. Mental wellness connected to social and economic conditions

Participants did not describe mental health as a separate issue. They described stress, anxiety and emotional wellbeing alongside family relationships, school pressure, financial insecurity, racism, employment, bullying, social media, loneliness and uncertainty about the future. Participants emphasized the need for safe spaces where young people can speak openly without judgment, and for supports that address several areas of life at the same time and are free and easy to access.

Examples:

- Program participants described anxiety about socializing and meeting people, and noted that young people can remain isolated even when surrounded by others.
- Participants discussed social media as a source of distraction and of pressure on identity, self-image and validation, and described the strong influence of peer opinion.
- One participant described staying focused through ongoing bullying and going on to earn awards and certificates in high school.
- Summer students identified gaps in mental health supports and social opportunities for Black children and youth, and recommended mental health education.
- Conference planners asked for workshops on mindfulness, emotional wellness and stress management, and participants identified the conference's mental health planning workshop as a favourite.
- Participants identified financial assistance and practical resources, including support with education costs, food insecurity, clothing, shelter and transportation, as connected to their wellbeing.

Testimonials

"A lot of youth are dealing with stress, mental health, school pressure, money, and family problems."

"A lot of youth are struggling with having community and a way to express themselves. Its important that there are safe spaces where they can learn and grow."

"I believe youth have trouble finding community, finding that extra support. I also believe youth struggle with the ability to believe in themselves."

"Having someone to talk to, good mentors, and more financial and community support would really help. It should also be free and easy for youth to access."

4. Practical learning, employment and entrepreneurship

Participants preferred learning that is practical, interactive and immediately relevant to everyday life. They asked for hands-on workshops rather than lectures, and for opportunities to apply new skills. Financial literacy, employment readiness, career exposure and entrepreneurship were consistent priorities, connected to the cost of living, education expenses and employment challenges.

Examples

- Conference planners asked for workshops on budgeting, saving and taxes, and for creative and hands-on activities such as bead making and self-expression through art.

- Program participants described building project planning, public speaking, budgeting, customer communication and entrepreneurship skills through the Youth Leadership Program.
- One participant explained that a car-detailing project helped him learn to price services, communicate expectations to customers and determine when additional work should result in additional charges.
- Summer students described developing adaptability, patience, collaboration, organization, time management, leadership and problem-solving skills through direct work with children and youth.
- Participants recommended resume and portfolio development, interview preparation, "day in the life" career exposure, independent-living skills such as cooking and budgeting, and partnerships with Black entrepreneurs who could "teach them the ropes."

Testimonials

"We should make sure youth can actually use what they learn — not just hear it."

"Interactive workshops help us actually learn — not just listen."

"In the -- Program, I enjoyed the homework as it allowed me to make a better blueprint of my plan. It also allowed me to understand my audience better."

"More opportunities for youth to build real-life skills, like financial literacy, job skills, and starting a business."

5. Youth voice, leadership and program design

Participants wanted to influence organizational decisions, to be consulted. Across the consultations, they contributed specific recommendations about program topics, delivery formats, accessibility, cultural representation and community engagement, and asked for opportunities to lead discussions, organize activities, teach skills and help shape programs. Facilitators emphasized that organizations should not assume what young people need but create opportunities for young people to speak for themselves.

Examples

- Youth consultations were designed from the outset to hear directly from youth to shape Ifarada's programs and services, including through the development of a Youth Advisory Committee.
- Conference planners set out objectives, workshop topics, theme ideas such as "Guiding Youth on Their Path" and "Voices of Change," and recommendations on venue, vendors, food and facilitation.
- Youth discussed social justice and how young people can take part in social change, including racism, marginalized communities, feminism and global events.
- Program participants recommended how future programs should be delivered: a balance of virtual and in-person sessions scheduled well in advance, breakout discussions, smaller interest-based groups with a mentor, and more frequent updates and check-ins.
- Participants proposed new programming, including sports and book clubs as a "third space for youth," arts and spoken word, and a "cultural community event like a block party or fish fry."

Testimonials

"Let's talk about what's happening in the world and how youth can be part of change."

"The MC should make it feel alive — not like we're watching a presentation."

"The meetings help me talk to people, hear different perspectives and also get inspiration and feedback for my own project. Hearing other people's ideas and insight is something I think is important when you're trying to build something as well."

"I do believe in-person sessions would be great."

How the themes shaped Kujenga's response

Youth consultation was built into the Kujenga Youth Wellbeing Project. Focus groups were held before school-based and therapeutic programs to understand participants' experiences, needs, challenges and goals and to shape program design. Findings were reviewed regularly to identify common themes and guide program adjustments, and they also informed organizational planning, including Ifarada's five-year strategic planning process.

The table below sets out each theme, what participants identified, and the programming delivered through Kujenga that addressed that need. It describes how programming aligned with the themes rather than attributing each program to a single consultation.

Theme	What participants identified	How programming addressed the need
Meaningful relationships	Mentors, trusted adults, peer connection and opportunities to be heard	Recurring weekly groups with consistent facilitators, allowing youth to move from introductory activities into conversations about identity, racism, relationships, emotional wellness and leadership; mentorship across programs; Youth and Parent Advisory Committees
Intergenerational connection	Reciprocal respect and organic, sustained relationships with Elders; learning cultural traditions and family history directly	The Mzee Film Project and Elder Circles, through which youth interviewed Elders and shared drumming, storytelling and reflection, building listening skills, cultural pride and intergenerational connection
Cultural identity and representation	Safe spaces for Black children and youth; access to Black professionals, entrepreneurs and community leaders	Programming that centred African, Indigenous and Caribbean cultures; Black and racialized facilitators, therapists, Elders and mentors; Culture Lab, Black Roots Club and Wonderfully Made Girls; youth conferences that connected participants

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Theme	What participants identified	How programming addressed the need
		with business, political and community leaders who reflected their identities
Mental wellness connected to broader conditions	Stress, anxiety, school pressure, isolation, racism and financial pressure experienced together	A continuum of individual and family counselling, play therapy, therapeutic groups, in-school programming, recreation, mentorship and referrals; a summer youth therapeutic program; storytelling, Black history, music, art and drumming integrated into wellness programming
Practical, participatory learning	Interactive workshops and skills that apply to everyday life	Youth in Biz (business planning, marketing, branding, budgeting, financing, pitching and networking); structured reflective assignments; programming that integrated sport, art, food, storytelling, music, movement and creative expression; the Adinkrahene Boys Boxing Program
Employment and entrepreneurship	Career preparation, work experience and connection with Black entrepreneurs	Canada Summer Jobs positions with Ifarada and other community organizations; connections with business leaders at the Adjust Your Crown Kings & Queens Black Youth Conference; partnerships with Black-owned businesses
Individualized support	One-to-one mentorship, regular check-ins and personalized follow-up	Individual counselling and family outreach within the continuum of supports; mentorship and supervision for summer and placement students
Youth leadership and decision-making	Opportunities to lead, shape programs and influence decisions	The Youth Advisory Committee planned conferences and trips, researched employment and community resources, shaped program design and developed the Ifarada Youth Bill of Rights; youth volunteers received honoraria; youth participants designed their own community initiatives; youth planning input informed the Tallawah Youth Conference
Accessible, flexible delivery	Virtual access, in-person connection and programs in familiar settings	In-person, online and hybrid programming; programming delivered in schools, youth hubs and community spaces, including the Mind Your Mind workshop moving into Bowmanville High School's Youth Corner
Training for young workers	Culturally responsive training, supervision	Africentric, drumming, mental health and cultural identity training; a continuum from

Theme	What participants identified	How programming addressed the need
	and preparation for supporting children with diverse needs	high-school volunteering to post-secondary placement to staff

The consultation on future programming identified improvements that will inform Ifarada's programming beyond the project, including more consistent one-to-one mentorship, stronger communication and follow-up, and expanded financial literacy, employment readiness, entrepreneurship and community-building opportunities.

Areas for continued growth

The consultations identified both strengths and areas requiring improvement. Participants did not ask for a fundamental change to the program model; their recommendations focused on making it more personal, accessible and responsive.

- Individualized mentorship. Regular one-to-one sessions, easier contact with mentors, more frequent check-ins and personalized follow-up between group sessions.
- Communication and follow-up. More frequent program updates and confirmation when youth reach out outside meetings.
- Balanced delivery. A combination of virtual, in-person, large-group and small-group programming, with in-person sessions scheduled well in advance.
- Structured supervision for student staff. Structured mentorship, regular check-ins, clearer expectations and preparation for supporting children with diverse developmental and behavioural needs.
- Practical life and employment skills. Financial literacy, independent-living skills such as cooking and budgeting, employment readiness, interview and resume preparation, entrepreneurship and career exposure.
- Community and cultural spaces. Sports and book clubs, Black literacy, arts and spoken word, year-round Black history and cultural education, and community gatherings.
- Representation and partnerships. Partnerships with Black entrepreneurs, professionals, community leaders and mentors who can provide guidance and real-world learning opportunities.
- Accessibility. Supports that are free and easy to access, including attention to education costs, food insecurity and the cost of living.

In summary

The focus groups demonstrate Ifarada's use of youth consultation and participatory evaluation to inform program development and service improvement. The findings provide qualitative support for an integrated approach that combines mental health and wellness, culturally responsive mentorship, leadership development, employment readiness, intergenerational engagement and community-building. The consultations identify both strengths and areas requiring improvement. Participants consistently valued supportive relationships, culturally affirming spaces and practical learning opportunities, while also

requesting more individualized mentorship, accessible programming and sustained opportunities for youth leadership.

4.2. Evaluation Report

The Kujenga ("to build") Youth Wellbeing Project substantially achieved its four objectives between September 12, 2022, and August 31, 2026. Delivered by Ifarada Centre for Excellence in partnership with the Durham Family and Cultural Centre (DFCC) and funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), the project supported Black and racialized children and youth ages 3 to 24, and their parents and caregivers, across the Durham Region of Ontario.

The project built a continuum of culturally responsive, trauma-informed supports: therapeutic groups, individual and family counselling, school-based programming, parenting education, mentorship, youth leadership, entrepreneurship, Elder–youth engagement, conferences and community events. Programming was delivered in schools, youth hubs, community settings and virtually.

Key results include:

- Mental health and wellbeing: youth gained practical coping and emotional-regulation skills, greater confidence, stronger peer and adult relationships, and increased cultural pride and belonging.
- Parenting and family wellbeing: parents reported greater confidence managing communication, emotional regulation and discipline, improved relationships with their children, reduced isolation and stronger connections to community supports.
- Youth transitions and leadership: youth moved from participants to advisors, volunteers, mentors and project creators, developing leadership, entrepreneurial and employment-readiness skills.
- Partnerships and sustainability: the project developed significant partnerships and networks consisting of regional network spanning education, child welfare, family services, community safety, municipalities, post-secondary institutions, Black-led organizations, Elders and businesses.

The evaluation drew on multiple data sources, including pre- and post-program surveys, focus groups, attendance records, facilitator observations, advisory committee input, testimonials and success stories. Together, these sources consistently show that programming was most effective when it was relationship-based, culturally grounded, flexible, accessible and sustained over time.

Project overview

Kujenga was designed to reduce disparities and negative outcomes facing Black and racialized children and youth through therapeutic groups, family outreach, mentorship, workshops and seminars. Programming centred African, Indigenous and Caribbean cultures and diverse histories, and connected participants with mentors who reflected their ethnic identities, strengthening social, emotional and cultural pride.

Objectives

1. Increase positive parenting skills through parent sessions that equip families to engage with community resources and address social isolation.
2. Improve mental health by providing culturally relevant, trauma-informed outreach and counselling to reduce stress and anxiety among Black and racialized youth.
3. Increase support for youth transitioning out of home through civic engagement, leadership programs, mentorship, volunteering and employment opportunities.
4. Build and nurture community partnerships across the region to increase capacity and sustainability.

Program components

Over four years, the project developed a broad continuum of programming, including:

- Mental health and wellness: individual and family counselling, play therapy, therapeutic groups, the Stop Now and Plan (SNAP) program, and summer youth therapeutic programs.
- School-based programming: therapeutic, cultural-identity, leadership and girls' and boys' groups in elementary and secondary schools and DDSB Youth Hubs.
- Parenting and family support: parenting workshops and webinars, a Parenting Series, parent coaching, family outreach, Men's Circle, a Parent Advisory Committee, and a Parent Handbook and Resource Binder.
- Youth leadership and transitions: the Youth Advisory Committee, Youth Leadership Program, Youth in Biz, Standing on Business, Adinkrahene Boys Boxing Program and Youth Corner.
- Culture and intergenerational connection: Culture Lab, Black Roots Club, Wonderfully Made Girls, Elder Circles and the Mzee Film Project.
- Conferences and community events: the Tallawah Youth Conference, Adjust Your Crown Kings & Queens Black Youth Conference, Rest (or) Reform Conference and the Ustawi Futures Community Wellness Fair.

Evaluation approach and methodology

Evaluation was embedded into every stage of the project and drew on multiple quantitative and qualitative sources. Using several points of data collection allowed Ifarada and DFCC to triangulate findings rather than rely on a single measure, producing a rich and well-rounded picture of impact.

Method	What it captured	Who contributed
Pre- and post-program surveys	Change in social and emotional wellbeing, cultural pride, confidence, belonging, leadership, parenting confidence, life skills and transition readiness	Children, youth, parents and caregivers

Focus groups	Participant experiences, needs, challenges and goals, held before school-based and therapeutic programs to shape design	Children, youth, parents and caregivers
Youth Advisory Committee	Emerging needs, program themes, outreach strategies, conference planning and future priorities	Youth advisors
Parent Advisory Committee	Feedback on family programming and community needs	Parents and caregivers
Attendance records and feedback forms	Participation and satisfaction across programs	All participants
Facilitator observations	Observed change in engagement, relationships, emotional expression and leadership	Facilitators, clinicians and placement students
Testimonials, client stories and success stories	Individual and family-level impact in participants' own words	Participants, parents, caregivers and educators
Annual impact and quarterly reporting	Multi-year themes and progress toward objectives	Ifarada and DFCC teams

Early in the project, YouthREX supported the development of evaluation tools, focus-group questions and the Youth Advisory structure. Placement students from post-secondary programs also contributed to research, data collection, focus groups and the development of annual impact and evaluation reports.

Findings were reviewed regularly to identify common themes and guide program adjustments. They also informed organizational planning: in the final years of the project, Ifarada compiled multi-year impact information and undertook a five-year strategic planning process for 2026–2031, holding three strategic planning sessions between October and December 2025, followed by a team feedback session.

Reach and participation

Kujenga reached children, youth and families through schools, youth hubs, community spaces, large-scale events and virtual delivery, meeting participants in environments where they already felt connected.

Delivery sites and reach

Area	Reach
Overall Reach	
Beneficiaries	Total: 5,000 + beneficiaries New beneficiaries: 3718 Participants by age:

Area	Reach
	0–17: 2,409; 18–24: 150; 25–34: 124; 35–44: 353; 45–54: 32; 55–64: 28; 65+: 18 Participants by gender: 693 (males), 1622 (females), 322 (other)
Communities reached	Ajax, Pickering, Port Perry, Uxbridge, Oshawa, Bowmanville and the broader Durham Region, Scarborough, Toronto, Peel Region.
Educational institutions engaged	20 + schools
Program delivery (planned outputs)	
Youth Focus groups and participants	
Individual and family counselling clients	688 participants
Parenting workshops and parent participants	167 participants
Parent Discussion groups and participants	157 participants
Mentor-led workshops and youth participants	111 participants
Transitional youth/ life-coaching workshops and participants	203 participants
Professional partnerships workshops and participants	86 participants
Experiential and cultural trips and participants	229 participants
Community gatherings and attendees	725 participants
Settings and partners	
Schools and youth hubs	37 in-school programs

Area	Reach
Educational institutions engaged	3 school boards
Total partners (new and existing)	110 new
Post secondary placement students hosted	69 placements
High-school volunteers	113 volunteers/participants
Major Events	
Tallawah Youth Conference	625 participants
Adjust your crown Kings & Queens Black Youth Conference	62 participants
Rest (or) Reform Conference	350 participants
Wellness Fairs	725 participants
Summer youth therapeutic program	322 participants
Talent Showcase	213 participants
Youth Leadership	90 participants
Youth Advisory Committee members	31 participants
Youth employed through Canada Summer Jobs	20 participants
Elders and cultural leaders engaged	36 participants
Resources Produced	
Parent Handbook and Resource Binder	“Nguvu ya Hadithi” The Strength of a Story – A 3 part-handbook, each 100 pages: Reimaging Parenting, Family and Community [Book One], Healing Pathways: Navigating Grief and Loss [Book Two], and Mental Health, Relationships and Youth Futures [Book Two].
Online video library	73 Videos, Parent Education: Video Library
Online learning courses	36 Online Courses: Neo Learning Centre

Volunteer Participation

Volunteers were at the heart of this project. Here's a look at some of the people who gave their time:

Volunteer Activities:

Activity	Submissions
Youth Advisory	94
Outreach	18
Group facilitation, including camps	15
Conference (Tallawah Youth Conference)	13
Education and learning, including tutoring	10
Presentation	10
Advocacy	9
Training	8
Mentorship	8
Community booths	5
Family Support Line	3

Commitment: Volunteers participated in approximately 3400 community service hours.
Gender Identity: Volunteers identified as 44 female-identified, 12 male-identified, and 1 gender-fluid.
Identity: 45 volunteers identified as Black, 5 South Asian, 4 Asian (including Southeast Asian), 2 White, and 2 Mixed ancestries (Black & White).

Referral Sources
During the project term, the project team received referrals from a variety of sources. Durham Children's Aid Society, Children's Aid Society of Toronto, and York Children's Aid Society led the referral sources by 60%. Organizations such as community organizations, schools, and other professionals contributed to 12% of the referrals. Self-referrals were marked as 11%. In 2021, Ifarada developed a Family Support Line. A small percentage of referrals originated from the support line. Previous clients and social media referrals were under 2%.

Location -Where clients live
The project's location was central to its success. Most clients resided in Oshawa, including Courtice, Bowmanville, and Newcastle. The total percentage was 38.4%. In Ajax, 18% of clients resided in this community, and 16% resided in Pickering. Whitby brought 15% of

participants, and 4% of participants resided in Toronto. Other regions such as York, Peel, Port Perry, and the GTA represented 2.3% of participants.

Presenting Concerns
Referral sources identified a range of concerns that required intervention. Mental health, co-parenting, and school challenges were the most common reasons for referral. Referrals also identified broader systemic issues such as housing and employment. Given these concerns, family counselling and outreach were the highest suggested intervention.

Concern	Share
Mental health	44%
Co-parenting difficulties	28%
School challenges	27%
Intimate partner violence	20%
Traumatic incident/loss	18%
Finances	18%
Child welfare involvement	17%
Housing	13%
Grief/loss	12%
Employment/career	9%
Criminal justice involvement	7%
Substance use	6%

The following data was also recorded in understanding the identities of the population served.

Measure	Figures
Ethnic identity (more than one could be selected)	Black/African descent (74%); Caribbean/Asian descent, (28%); European/White 10% South Asian 3.7% Indigenous 2.2% Middle Eastern 0.8%
Gender	Female 69%; Male 21.5%; other identities 0.3%; not recorded 9%

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Concern	Share
Immigration status	Canadian citizens 73% Landed Immigrants 5.8% Refugees 2.8% Non-status 2% Work/Student visa 1.8% Newcomer 0.2% Not recorded 13.5%
First language	First language other than English, or English plus another language, in 18 referrals. Languages include French, Creole, Yoruba, Twi, Tamil, Malayalam and sign language
2SLGBTQ+	24 referrals
Income source	Full-time work 37.1%; ODSP/OW/CPP 14.6%; part-time 7.5%; students 8.5%; unemployed 2.3%; not recorded 23%

Services requested

Many referrals requested services focused on supporting the whole family and helping people better manage their wellbeing.67% of referrals requested youth or family wellbeing services.

- 33% of referrals requested group programming.

Program interest:

Program type	Referrals
Children's programs (up to age 12)	192
Youth programs (13–29)	130
Youth mentorship (16–29)	83
Adult and parenting programs	238



Outcomes and impact

Each of the project's four objectives produced measurable change for participants, families and the community. The strongest outcomes emerged in therapeutic, mental health and culturally responsive programming.

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Objective 1: Positive parenting and reduced isolation
The project strengthened parenting capacity through an integrated family-wellbeing model combining parenting education, webinars, counselling, parent coaching, family outreach, discussion spaces, resource navigation and community engagement. Milestones included:

- Delivery of the Stop Now and Plan (SNAP)® program with the Child Development Institute from 2024, adapted through Africentric and anti-oppressive approaches.
- Parent education webinars and workshops that covered topics such as youth involvement in the justice system and mental health, co-parenting, Francophone youth mental health, grief and loss, parenting approaches, attachment, and women's wellness and mindfulness. Parent webinars were led by practitioners from a range of disciplines, and approaches to strengthening the family system. All webinars included an anti-Black racist lens examining a systemic approach to family systems. Webinars were posted online for participants to view at any time.
- Supportive in-person and virtual parenting circles centered on topics of interest to participants such as women empowerment, men's engagement circles, grief and loss support groups, co-parenting, and parenting series.
- A comprehensive online video library and learning courses covering parenting, co-parenting, children's mental health, conflict, healing relationships and intergenerational experiences.
- Completion in 2026 of a Parent Handbook and Resource Binder, alongside a Parenting Series, Men's Circle and Parent Advisory Committee.

Outcomes: Participants reported feeling better equipped to manage communication, emotional regulation and discipline; described improved relationships with their children; felt less isolated after connecting with other caregivers; and reported greater awareness of community supports and confidence navigating systems. Parents identified culturally responsive facilitation as helping them feel safer and more willing to participate. In feedback surveys, participants reported that culturally responsive facilitation reinforced feelings of safety and their willingness to participate. Participants noted that they were able to develop skills that helped them to manage emotionally charged moments which reduced conflict in their homes. Parents of adolescents reported that they felt more confidence in supporting their teens' emotional development. Parenting capacity reportedly increased when parents were given information that helped them to understand systems and navigate barriers, access resources earlier before concern escalated, strengthen family relationships, and advocate for themselves and their children.

Regarding interventions, participants noted the following measures:

- Made relevant suggestions- 100%
- Was responsive to my needs- 95%
- Listened; I felt heard and understood- 95%
- Informed me of other programs and services- 95%
- I felt welcomed- 100%
- Considered my family's experiences- 100%

- Considered how anti-Black racism affected my family- 95%
- Advocated with me with Children's Aid Society- 85%
- Showed empathy and validated my experiences- 87% of respondents
- Helped me to develop strategies – 84% of respondents
- Gave me a new perspective- 83% of respondents

The change metrics varied amongst participants. Most people noted that there was some improvement in the following areas: issue no longer affects the ability to thrive, stress levels, mental and emotional wellness and safety. Participants reported a significant change in the following areas: family members feel better supported and mental and emotional wellness.

Objective 2: Youth mental health and wellbeing

The project created a continuum of support including individual counselling, family therapy, play therapy, therapeutic groups, in-school programming, recreation, mentorship and referrals to specialized services. Culture was integrated into wellness programming through storytelling, Black history, music, art, drumming, discussions of racism and identity, and culturally representative facilitators.

Outcomes:

- Youth surveys in late 2025 showed participants using coping strategies such as art, deep breathing, music, movement, mindfulness and talking with trusted adults.
- Youth reported greater capacity to manage difficult emotions and greater awareness of people they could turn to.
- Participants reported increased cultural pride and identified seeing facilitators and peers who "look like me" as building confidence and belonging.
- Wonderfully Made Girls participants grew in identifying and articulating emotions, recognizing triggers, using coping strategies, navigating conflict respectfully and building a sense of sisterhood.
- School-based participants described the groups as safe, affirming spaces where they could speak openly, feel heard and access support without judgment.
- Offering of counseling, family outreach, psychotherapy by external contractors, post-graduate students, and a family outreach professional.
- Therapeutic group programs centered on mental health and identity, emotional regulation and anxiety, mindfulness, social and emotional group, and more.
- Free daily summer therapeutic program for children and youth from 2023 to 2026. During this program, over 322 youth participated.
- 37 in-school programs extended from single session to 20 -week programs
- Weekly male-focused group programs centered on skill development and emotional regulation.
- Play therapy and play-based intervention for children who encountered.
- A plethora of cultural integrated into wellness, such as culture and identity programs, storytelling and intergenerational programs, art and creative expressive programs, and open discussions on culture, race and identity.

The project advanced its objective of strengthening youth mental health and wellbeing through a comprehensive, culturally responsive continuum of care that addressed the emotional, psychological, social, and developmental needs of Black, Indigenous, and racialized children and youth. Interventions centered on improving emotional regulation, coping skills, and psychological wellbeing. Clinical observations and participant experiences indicated positive developments in emotional awareness, self-expression, coping strategies, and interpersonal functioning. Through individual counselling, play therapy, and therapeutic groups, children and youth were supported in identifying and communicating their emotions, processing experiences of trauma, managing anxiety and stress, and developing healthier responses to interpersonal conflict. Play-based and creative therapeutic approaches were particularly valuable in creating developmentally appropriate opportunities for younger children to express difficult emotions and experiences that they may not have been able to articulate verbally.

The project also recognized that improvements in mental health are not always reflected in the immediate reduction of symptoms. For some participants, progress involved developing trust in therapeutic relationships, becoming more comfortable discussing personal challenges, recognizing when additional support was needed, or demonstrating increased willingness to participate in counselling and group activities.

A second intervention goal centered on strengthening family relationships and protective factors. Family therapy and parent-focused interventions contributed to the project's broader objective of creating supportive environments that promote positive youth mental health. Therapeutic interventions helped caregivers develop greater awareness of children's emotional and developmental needs while strengthening communication, conflict resolution, emotional responsiveness, and parenting strategies. These interventions addressed an important protective factor in youth wellbeing: the quality and stability of family relationships. By supporting both young people and their caregivers, the project sought to reduce family stressors, strengthen parent–child connections, and create environments in which children and youth felt emotionally safe, understood, and supported.

Another critical intervention centered on integrating cultural identity, belonging, and racial wellness. A distinguishing feature of the project was the intentional integration of culture into mental health and wellness programming. Storytelling, Black history, music, art, drumming, discussions of racism and identity, and engagement with culturally representative facilitators created opportunities for youth to explore their identities, strengthen cultural pride, and develop meaningful connections with their communities.

This approach recognized that experiences of anti-Black racism, discrimination, cultural exclusion, and racial stereotyping can influence psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, identity development, and feelings of belonging. By creating culturally affirming spaces, the project provided opportunities for young people to discuss these experiences while developing positive racial and cultural identities. The integration of Africentric and culturally grounded approaches also positioned mental health as a collective responsibility,

emphasizing the importance of family, community, cultural knowledge, intergenerational relationships, and shared experiences in promoting healing and resilience.

Expanding access to mental health supports through schools and community programming was a critical intervention in the project. School-based interventions, recreation, and mentorship expanded opportunities to engage young people who might not otherwise access formal mental health services. These activities created additional pathways for relationship-building, early identification of emotional and behavioural concerns, and connection to supportive adults. Recreational and group-based activities also provided opportunities to practise communication, cooperation, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and social skills within supportive peer environments. Importantly, these interventions helped position mental health support as part of everyday community engagement rather than solely as a response to psychological distress.

Finally, supporting continuity of care and access to specialized services. The project's referral pathways helped connect children, youth, and families with specialized services when their needs extended beyond the scope of community-based programming. Referrals to organizations such as Ontario Shores represented an important component of the continuum of care, facilitating access to additional clinical resources and more intensive interventions when appropriate. The project also demonstrated the importance of maintaining accessible, trusted relationships with young people and families throughout their mental health journeys. Some participants expressed interest in continuing counselling beyond their initial involvement, highlighting the perceived value of ongoing therapeutic relationships and the need for sustained, affordable mental health services.

Objective 3: Youth transitions, leadership and employment
Youth accessed multiple pathways into leadership, employment readiness, civic engagement and entrepreneurship:

- Youth in Biz taught business planning, marketing, branding, budgeting, financing, pitching and networking, with participants reporting greater confidence discussing business ideas.
- The Youth Advisory Committee planned conferences and trips, researched employment and community resources, shaped program design and developed the Ifarada Youth Bill of Rights.
- The Youth Leadership Program supported youth to design their own community initiatives in mental wellness, entrepreneurship, fashion, jewellery-making, dance, cultural identity, storytelling, media and community care, building skills in budgeting, public speaking, outreach and project management.
- The Boys Boxing Program combined physical training with discipline, perseverance and leadership; youth reported reduced stress and greater confidence.
- Canada Summer Jobs funding enabled some youth to secure employment with Ifarada and other community organizations.

- Youth conferences connected participants with business, political and community leaders who reflected their identities.

Outcomes: Youth gained leadership and employability skills, confidence, entrepreneurial knowledge and civic experience, increasingly moving from recipients of programming to advisors, volunteers, mentors, planners and creators.

Objective 4: Partnerships, capacity and sustainability
Partnership development became one of the project's clearest organizational outcomes. The network grew from 28 partnerships and networks in October–December 2022 to at least 18 distinct partnerships and community networks actively strengthened through more than 50 meetings, consultations and planning sessions in April–June 2026 alone.

- Education: Durham District School Board, Durham Catholic District School Board and 14 educational institutions provided program space, referrals and long-term relationships with students.
- Child welfare and family services: Durham, York, Toronto and Catholic Children's Aid Societies, Durham Region Social Services, Kennedy House, Malvern Family Resource Centre and Surrey Place formed a broad referral network.
- Clinical partners: the Child Development Institute, VRAI Health and Wellness and contracted psychotherapists expanded access to culturally responsive counselling.
- Regional planning: Ifarada joined the Durham Connect Situation Table, the Durham Region Strategic Advisory Group for Community Safety and Wellbeing, the Durham Child and Youth Planning Network, the Missing and Exploited Youth Action Plan Community Roundtable and Family Service Ontario networks.
- Municipal: the Town of Ajax provided free or reduced-cost space, saving more than $10,000 in facility costs, and the Town of Ajax and City of Pickering opened outreach opportunities through their equity committees.
- Community: Elders, cultural leaders, NSAA Community, Black-owned businesses such as AJ's Doll House, and Durham Community Health Centre contributed mentorship, cultural knowledge and in-kind resources.
- Post-secondary: students from Child and Youth Care, Social Service Work, Addictions and Mental Health, Community Nursing, Criminal Justice and Social Work programs supported delivery, building a pipeline of culturally responsive practitioners.

Outcomes: Ifarada and DFCC emerged with greater community visibility, stronger referral and crisis-response pathways, broader cross-sector relationships and expanded capacity. Partnerships were reciprocal: schools gained culturally responsive programming at no cost, post-secondary institutions gained quality placements, municipalities strengthened community engagement, and service providers gained culturally responsive referral options. Ifarada also advanced accreditation readiness, policy development, staff training, clinical consultation and governance.

Defined Outcomes

The program supported participants to achieve the following skills and service type and outcome.

Service type	Share
Skills development workshops	30.7%
Referrals or navigation to social services and supports	25.4%
Social opportunities and gatherings	16.4%
Scheduled activities	7.9%
Leadership opportunities	6.9%
One-on-one consultations or coaching	6.3%
Mentorship	2.6%
Information sessions	2.6%
Providing drop-in space	1.6%
Peer support interventions	0.5%

Difference made in participants' lives

Outcome	Share
Increase in wellbeing	39.2%
Improved sense of social acceptance and belonging	29.1%
Better quality or quantity of relationships	20.6%
Increase in positive social behaviours	18.5%
More knowledge and skills relating to family, friends and community	18.5%
Improved access to services	15.9%
Increase in social activity participation	14.3%
Improved satisfaction with social situation and community connection	9.0%
Reduction in stress related to social issues	7.4%

Areas of social inclusion covered

Area	Share
Social and relationship skills	38.1%
Life skills	18.0%
Health and wellness	17.5%
Parenting	10.1%
Student success	4.2%
Arts and culture	3.7%
Civic and community engagement	2.1%
Intergenerational	2.1%
Anti-racism	1.1%
Financial literacy and empowerment	1.1%
Bullying	0.5%



In summary, across the project, skills development workshops were the most common form of support (31% of entries), followed by social opportunities and gatherings (16%), scheduled activities (8%), leadership opportunities (7%) and one-on-one consultations or coaching (6%). Programming focused most often on social and relationship skills (38%), life skills (18%), health and wellness (18%) and parenting (10%), with smaller numbers of entries addressing student success, arts and culture, civic engagement, intergenerational connection, anti-racism and financial literacy.

The difference most often reported for participants was an increase in wellbeing (39% of entries), followed by an improved sense of social acceptance and belonging (29%), stronger relationships with friends, family and acquaintances (21%), more positive social behaviours (19%) and greater knowledge and skills relating to family, friends and community (19%). Together, these results show programming centred on building relationships, belonging and practical skills, with wellbeing as the most commonly reported result.

4.4. Key Successes

Over the course of the Kujenga Youth Wellbeing Project, Ifarada and DFCC built a continuum of culturally responsive supports that grew steadily in reach, depth and community trust, engaging children, youth and adults across the Durham Region. The

program witnessed successes in its reach, diversity in programs and services, responsiveness to the community's needs, participant outcomes, and partnerships.

Participants flourished when given safe, affirming spaces to build relationships, explore identity, develop practical skills and connect with trusted adults and peers. School-based programming expanded from a few sites to a network of schools across the Durham and Kawartha regions. In many schools, the project team aligned with the schools Black Student Association to support programming. Programs that began with two or three participants often grew to nine or more within weeks, and many groups were extended because of the strength of the relationships formed. Youth leadership flourished as the Youth Advisory grew throughout the project. Advisory members planned conferences, researched employment resources and authored a Youth Bill of Rights, while learning about civic and volunteer engagement, strategic planning, employment, and governance.

Within one year, the Tallawah Youth Conference grew from its inaugural year in 2025 to more than 400 youth in 2026, four times its original target, while the Community Wellness Fair welcomed more than 300 community members and 40 vendors in 2026 and hosted the first sacred fire circle at the Audley Recreation Centre. Survey results affirmed this impact: in late 2025, 78% of youth reported pride in their culture and heritage, 81% reported having strategies to manage their emotions, and 80% reported having tools to address anti-Black racism and feeling prepared for life's next transitions. By the final quarter, all survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with every outcome measure. Partnerships grew to several partnerships and regional networks, and the project hosted a steady pipeline of post-secondary placement students.

4.5. Key Lessons learned

The project demonstrated that culturally responsive programming is most effective when it is relationship-based, consistent, flexible and delivered where young people already feel connected. Consistent facilitation and recurring weekly groups allowed trust to deepen over time, enabling youth to move from introductory activities into meaningful conversations about identity, racism, relationships, emotional wellness and leadership.

Schools and familiar community spaces proved to be powerful points of access, as shown when programs shifted to in-school which helped to grow the engagement. Programming was strongest when it offered many ways to participate, including sport, art, cooking, drumming, storytelling, journaling, movement and discussion, and when content was tailored by age and group; boys' programming, for example, thrived when it paired physical activity with mentorship and reflection. The project also showed that meaningful engagement takes many forms, as when a quiet participant in Culture Lab engaged fully through art and later asked when the next session would take place. Families typically arrived with interconnected needs spanning mental health, school, trauma and loss, and family relationships, which affirmed the value of an integrated model combining counselling, group programming, parenting support and system navigation. Finally, youth

leadership grew most when young people were given clear roles, mentorship and recognition, and when they were invited to shape programs rather than simply attend them.

Overall, the project showed that social inclusion programming for Black and racialized children, youth and families is most effective when it is relationship-based, culturally grounded, flexible, accessible and sustained over time.

1. Needs are interconnected and call for a holistic response. Participants' needs often spanned mental health, family relationships, school, grief, housing and experiences of racism. Combining group programming with counselling, family outreach, mentorship, advocacy and referrals allowed the project to respond to the whole person and family.
2. Consistency builds trust and deepens impact. Recurring weekly groups with the same facilitators allowed youth to move from introductory activities into meaningful conversations about identity, racism, relationships, emotional wellness and leadership.
3. Meeting youth where they are increases access. Schools, youth hubs and familiar community spaces were powerful points of entry, as the Mind Your Mind workshop demonstrated when it moved into Bowmanville High School.
4. Flexible, interactive design drives engagement. Programming that integrated sport, art, food, storytelling, music, movement and creative expression, and was tailored by age and group, produced the deepest engagement.
5. Representation is central to cultural responsiveness. Cultural responsiveness is reflected not only in curriculum but in who delivers programming. Black and racialized facilitators, therapists, Elders and mentors helped participants feel seen and understood.
6. Investing in the workforce pipeline pays off. Post-secondary placements and high-school volunteering created a continuum from volunteer to placement student to staff, building capacity while preparing future culturally responsive practitioners.
7. Multiple evaluation sources produce richer evidence. Combining surveys, focus groups, advisory input, observation and stories captured impact that no single measure could.
8. Reciprocal partnerships endure. Relationships were strongest when Ifarada, DFCC and partners shared training, facilitators, expertise, networks and resources, and when consistent presence replaced one-time outreach.
9. Flexible resourcing supports growth. As community response grew, flexible budget categories, adequate working capital and contingency funding proved valuable for scaling outreach, participant supports and events.
10. Sustained investment protects community gains. Participants consistently asked for continued school groups, mentorship, youth hubs, retreats and counselling, showing that the need for culturally responsive supports extends beyond a single funding period.

Recommendations for future investment

The project was highly successful, and the recommendations below focus on building on it. They are offered to help funders and governments best support community-led, culturally responsive initiatives.

Recommendation	Why it matters
Longer-term, continuous funding	Four years built strong infrastructure and trust. Longer horizons let organizations build on that foundation and design a developmental pathway from a child's first school group through to youth leadership and mentorship.
Retain the integrated, holistic model	Mental health and social inclusion are interwoven with culture, education, family relationships and economic wellbeing. Flexible funding lets organizations respond to the whole person and family.
Invest in the workforce	Competitive compensation, benefits, professional development, clinical supervision and staff wellness sustain the stable relationships that were among the projects' most powerful features.
Scale capacity with demand	Programming grew considerably over the project. Additional resources would extend these opportunities to more children, youth and families.
Fund knowledge mobilization and public education	Forums, webinars, resource materials, research summaries and platforms for youth and families would share community insight with parents, educators, service providers, institutions and decision-makers.
Prioritize school-based delivery	Schools are trusted, accessible environments and often a young person's first connection to the broader continuum of supports.
Embed compensated youth leadership	Youth were most engaged when they influenced decisions, led activities and mentored others, not only when they were consulted.
Formalize post-secondary partnerships	A continuum from high-school volunteering to placements to employment builds both organizational capacity and the future culturally responsive workforce.
Resource evaluation directly	Dedicated evaluation funding, tools and staff time help community organizations capture an even fuller picture of their impact.
Build sustainability planning in from year one	Diversified funding, accreditation, partnerships and in-kind support are strongest when developed while the project and its relationships are active.



4.6. Testimonials and Participant Feedback

Across participant surveys, focus groups, facilitator reports and program feedback, several consistent themes emerged. Overall, participants described the greatest benefits in the areas of belonging and social connection, emotional wellness, cultural pride, confidence and youth voice, life skills and preparation for the future, and family wellbeing.

1. Increased belonging, peer connection and reduced isolation

One of the strongest themes was the importance of having safe and consistent spaces where youth could connect with other young people, particularly other Black and racialized youth. Participants valued opportunities to speak openly, build friendships and feel understood by peers and trusted adults.

At St. Theresa, one participant reported that since joining the girls' group she had become more social, developed friendships with students in different classes and felt that girls were more supportive of one another. At St. Mark, youth described the program as one of the few spaces where they could speak openly without feeling dismissed or being viewed as disruptive. Black Roots Club participants similarly identified the value of having a consistent space where they could connect, have fun and express themselves. These experiences aligned directly with the project outcome of reducing social isolation and strengthening social inclusion, positive peer relationships and community belonging.

2. Improved emotional wellness and coping

Youth consistently identified learning practical strategies for managing emotions, stress and difficult experiences. In St. Mark survey responses, all respondents reported learning wellness or coping tools, including deep breathing, resting, and talking to friends about their feelings. Most also reported having trusted people they could turn to and strategies for managing difficult emotions.

Wonderfully Made Girls participants developed skills including grounding, breathing, journaling, movement, mindfulness, positive self-talk and creative expression. Facilitators observed that participants became increasingly able to identify and articulate emotions, work through difficult feelings and support one another. Boys participating in Adinkrahene programming also reported that physical activity and the group environment helped them manage stress, remain active and connect with others. These findings aligned with the intended outcome of improving the social and mental wellness of Black and racialized youth and strengthening their ability to cope with stress and anxiety.

3. Increased cultural pride and positive racial identity

Cultural affirmation was another significant theme. Youth did not simply learn about culture; they were encouraged to examine how Black identity, representation, heritage and lived experiences affected how they understood themselves.

At St. Mark, participants explored Black hair, beauty standards, cultural appropriation, stereotypes and self-image. Youth discussed the meaning of their hair, experiences of pressure or criticism related to their appearance, and the importance of embracing Black

hair as a form of identity and self-expression. Survey respondents reported greater knowledge of and pride in their culture and heritage, with one participant specifically identifying learning about her hair and where it came from.

Black Roots Club participants explored Black culture through discussions and activities related to identity, family, community, music, food, joy and positive experiences. DFCC's Culture Lab and Youth Corner expanded this through Black History Month, Black Excellence, art, Afrofuturism, fashion, music and technology. These experiences directly supported the project outcome of increasing cultural pride among Black and racialized youth and helping youth develop a stronger and more affirming sense of identity.

4. Greater confidence, voice and leadership
Participants increasingly demonstrated confidence in speaking, expressing opinions, taking leadership roles and supporting peers. Youth moved from being recipients of programming to contributing to group discussions, mentoring younger participants, leading activities and influencing program planning.

Wonderfully Made participants engaged in leadership activities, storytelling, visioning and self-expression that strengthened their communication and confidence. Black Roots Club participants practised leadership, problem-solving and collaboration. Boys' programs emphasized accountability, teamwork, decision-making and leadership. Youth Advisory members also influenced programs and community initiatives, demonstrating that young people could meaningfully contribute to decisions affecting them.

This aligned with the project's broader goals related to youth leadership, civic engagement, confidence, community participation and ensuring that youth had meaningful opportunities to influence their environments.

5. Increased preparation for adulthood and future transitions
Youth feedback and program observations also demonstrated growth in practical life skills and readiness for future transitions. Participants developed skills in communication, decision-making, goal setting, teamwork, conflict resolution, financial literacy, employment preparation and entrepreneurship.

Through Youth In Biz, participants explored budgeting, marketing, branding, financing, business operations, product development and public speaking. Youth developed business and app concepts and practised presenting their ideas. St. Mark participants reported learning practical skills such as communicating with friends about emotions and preparing a résumé, while most survey respondents indicated that they felt they had tools that could help them prepare for future life stages.

These results aligned with the project outcome of helping youth feel better prepared for adulthood, employment, education and other significant life transitions.

6. Stronger family communication and caregiver confidence
Although parent-specific evaluation data was less extensive than youth data, available feedback indicated improvements in caregiver confidence and family communication. Caregivers participating in programming demonstrated increased confidence in supporting adolescent emotional development and communication. Reports also identified calmer and more constructive conversations within families and greater awareness of available community supports and resources.

This aligned with the intended outcomes of strengthening positive parenting skills, improving parent-child relationships, helping caregivers support children through life changes and increasing families' connections to community resources.
Participants consistently described Kujenga as a space where they felt seen, valued and proud of who they are.

- Girls in the Adjust Your Crown program shared reflections such as "I learned to be proud of who I am and to never allow anyone to tilt my crown," "I know my worth" and "That I am black and beautiful," while an Adjust Your Crown Queens participant described the program as "a community and a safe space for others to express themselves."
- Summer camp participants reflected, "We should accept who we are" and "I liked being with my fellow Black people," and youth in later programs valued "the way that they care for us and treat us like we matter" and noted that activities "always had a moral behind them."
- Parents spoke to the program's value for their families: one shared that "the programming is very important to my son. He constantly asks me when the next event is," another described it as "quality programming for FREE," and a caregiver credited counselling with helping her maintain "a healthy and positive relationship" with her child. Parents also reported that their children felt "safer," more respected and more understood.
- School staff echoed this impact, noting that "our students loved it and are still telling me thank you for having you come in" and that "all students were engaged… for the entire session," while a teacher at St. Mark became emotional describing the support the program provided students during a period of staff transition.

Parents building lasting support networks. In the Women's Parenting Support Group, parents who initially described stress and isolation grew into a close community. One parent shared that she felt "less alone," and participants created a WhatsApp group to keep supporting one another between sessions.

Youth finding their voice in schools. At a local high school, Black and racialized students-built advocacy skills and worked with facilitators to bring their concerns to school administration. One participant shared, "My voice finally feels heard." At Catholic School, girls described the program as a space where they could speak openly, and a teacher valued the consistency it offered students during a staff transition.

Confidence and friendship. At a Catholic school, a 10-year-old Black girl who had been shy became more social, formed friendships across classes and felt supported by other girls.

Older participants stepped into mentorship roles, leading games and mindfulness activities for younger youth.

Impact extending into the home. A caregiver shared that, after cooking activities in the Adinkrahene Boys Program, her sons began preparing dinner for the family every Saturday, with visible pride. Another parent described how working with a therapist who shared similar lived experiences gave her daughter a level of comfort and trust she had not seen before.

Pathways to opportunity. At DFCC's Adjust Your Crown Kings & Queens Black Youth Conference, a young male braider and entrepreneur was introduced to the CEO of a barber franchise, opening doors to mentorship and employment. Through Canada Summer Jobs, some youth from the Youth Advisory Council and leadership workshops secured paid positions with Ifarada and other community organizations.

Many forms of engagement. In DFCC's Culture Lab, one youth who rarely spoke engaged fully through artmaking and later asked when the next session would take place.
Learning that travels. In one school, a teacher reported that students continued discussing session topics afterward and shared their learning with classmates outside the program.
Elders as knowledge keepers. Through the Mzee initiative and Elder Circles, youth interviewed Elders and shared drumming, storytelling and reflection, building listening skills, cultural pride and intergenerational connection.

Testimonials and quotes:
<u>Youth: identity and self-worth (Adjust Your Crown, April–June 2024)</u>

- “To be me.”
- “I am a queen.”
- “What people say about me doesn’t define me.”
- “To embrace myself as I am and don’t change myself for nobody.”
- “I can walk away with a better view of myself.”
- “I now have ways to keep my crown from falling.”
- “I’ve learned how to cope when dealing with low self esteem.”
- “Knowing that I am more worthy of a person than others may tell me.”
- “Don’t let others define who you are, you know yourself better than anyone.”



- "To be more confident as a woman of colour, and to embrace who I am as a person."
- "The unity that all the girls in the workshop had taught me that it's the best thing for young black women to hold to get through this world."
- "This workshop allowed us to learn more and grow so we can help teach other people whose crown may have fallen."
- "Something I am walking away from today's workshop is more insight on some struggles that black girls face that I have not experienced. It was eye opening to me."

Youth: Adjust Your Crown Queens (October–December 2023)

- "A good understanding that I am not alone."
- "Learning to have more confidence."
- Learning "to trust myself" and listen to "my heart and mind more without overthinking it."

Youth: entrepreneurship programs

- Youth in DFCC's 2023 entrepreneurship program described feeling "enlightened," "awesome" and "comfort," and one wrote that they enjoyed having fun while developing skills to start a business and turn their ideas into plans.
- Youth in Biz participants (2024) named their favourite parts as "Building a business," "Having fun" and "Working with my friends," and said they learned "The art of marketing," "How to pitch ideas," "Teamwork," "Presenting" and "How much time costs."

Youth: summer camp (July–September 2025)

- "I felt proud." / "I learned patience."
- "I should be proud of it."
- "I liked that we learned about our culture."
- "Very culturally aligned."
- Youth described gaining a "better understanding of myself," learning to be "confident and strong," and "speaking up for myself and others."
- Participants said, "everything was addressed" and that staff did "extremely well."

Youth: other programs

- "I like everything." (October–December 2025)
- Youth valued facilitators and peers who "look like me." (October–December 2025)
- An Askira Girls participant said she had never found a space like the group, where she "wanted to be friends" and could "talk about my life and my family." She went on to join the Armani Summer Camp. (April–June 2024)
- A Kusoma Reading Circle participant noticed a book character had the same braids as her, which she described as "beautiful." (April–June 2024)

Parents and caregivers

- "We never heard of DFCC before. A friend sent me it on Instagram and I wanted to sign my kids up for everything. My kids clearly enjoyed themselves because they did not see me standing here ready to pick them up. I love you guys' space; the youth art wall is very nice." (January–March 2024)
- "My child loves the prizes they got, thank you… we will see you at the next one for sure!" (January–March 2024)
- "My children really enjoy the programming, and I love how it gives me a break." (January–March 2024)
- "He wants to bring his friends along and he also meets new friends in the program. I love that there's something for him to do without his phone." (January–March 2024)
- Asked what parenting tool she learned in an Aya workshop, one parent answered, "all of the tools." (April–June 2024)
- An Aya (parent group) parent came to understand that small, attentive actions toward her child were not "too nice" and could build a more open relationship. (April–June 2024)
- A caregiver who felt isolated at the start of the series said the sessions normalized her worries and strengthened her confidence in her ability to be a "good" parent. (April–June 2024)

School staff

- "Thank you again for yesterday, our students loved it and are still telling me thank you for having you come in. We will work together to do something for the boys as well. The boys were not happy with me when they heard about the event. Let us plan for the next school year." (April–June 2024)
- "I got a lot of positive feedback from students about how engaging the workshop was." (April–June 2024)

Staff and facilitator reflections

- DFCC noted that young women expressed a need to connect "off the grid more often." (January–March 2024)
- Facilitators observed a strengthening "community feeling" among racialized students, as youth kept bringing classmates to join the group. (April–June 2024)
- In girls' programming, conversations shifted from structured discussion to more organic "girl talk," reflecting growing trust. (October–December 2025)

Overall, the participant feedback was strongly consistent with the project's expected outcomes. Youth repeatedly described feeling more connected, supported, confident and culturally affirmed, while also developing practical strategies for managing emotions, relationships and future transitions. The feedback also demonstrated that these outcomes were interconnected: youth were often better able to build confidence and manage stress because they first experienced a sense of safety and belonging; cultural affirmation

strengthened self-confidence and connection; and trusted relationships created the conditions for youth to practise leadership, seek support and develop new skills. The projects' culturally responsive and relationship-based approach supported multiple dimensions of youth and family wellbeing at the same time.



5. Conclusion

The Kujenga Youth Wellbeing Project brought together Ifarada Centre for Excellence and Durham Family and Cultural Centre to strengthen the social and mental wellbeing of Black and racialized children, youth, and families. Funded by Employment and Social Development Canada through the Social Development Partnerships Program – Social Inclusion, the Project delivered more than 180 programs and initiatives, reached more than 5,000 community members, and cultivated more than 100 partnerships and community relationships.

The evaluation shows that Kujenga substantially achieved its four objectives. Parents and caregivers reported greater confidence managing communication, emotional regulation, and discipline; improved relationships with their children; reduced isolation; and stronger connections to community supports. Youth developed coping and emotional-regulation skills, confidence, and cultural pride. In late 2025, 78% of youth surveyed reported pride in their culture and heritage, 81% reported having strategies to manage their emotions, and 80% reported having tools to address anti-Black racism and feeling prepared for life's next transitions. Young people moved from participants to advisors, volunteers, mentors, planners, and employees, and the Tallawah Youth Conference grew to more than 400 youth in 2026. Partnerships with school boards, child-welfare and family services, clinical providers, municipalities, post-secondary institutions, Elders, and community leaders expanded the capacity, visibility, and influence of both organizations within regional planning and decision-making spaces.

Across surveys, focus groups, advisory input, facilitator observations, and participant stories, the evidence consistently points to the same conclusion: programming for Black and racialized children, youth, and families is most effective when it is relationship-based, culturally grounded, flexible, accessible, and sustained over time. Guided by the principle of *sauti za vijana*, the voices of youth, Kujenga treated community members as holders of knowledge and invited young people and families to shape the programs built for them. The Project also faced real constraints, including funding pressures, challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled staff, and the competing demands carried by participants and their families. Kujenga did not eliminate the structural challenges facing Black and racialized families, nor did it resolve the sustainability challenges confronting grassroots organizations. Participants' continued requests for school-based groups, mentorship, youth hubs, retreats, and counselling show that the need for culturally responsive supports extends beyond a single funding period.

Kujenga means "to build." Over four years, the Project built programs, partnerships, leadership pathways, and community trust, along with a framework of practice that can continue to inform future work: listen to the community, recognize cultural and lived knowledge as expertise, build trusted relationships, create accessible and affirming spaces, respond flexibly to emerging needs, and invest in young people as leaders. Its legacy rests with the children, youth, families, staff, Elders, and partners who will carry that work forward.

Complied and Prepared by: Nicole Perryman, Executive Director, Ifarada: Centre for Excellence. Featured photos were taken at the 2026 Tallawah Youth Conference by Keane Photography and Teeography