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Social Inclusion and Participation of Black and Racialized Youth in Higher Education

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Contents

Overview	01
Social Inclusion	02
Biases in Post-Secondary Education	03
Barriers to Post-Secondary Education	04
Academic Barriers to Post-Secondary Education	04
Financial Barriers to Post-Secondary Education	05
An Iceberg Model of Black and Racialized Youth Participation in Sport and Post-Secondary Education	06
A Call for Change in Post-Secondary Education	07
Ways to Foster a Sense of Belonging in Post-secondary Education.	08
Anti-Black racism in Post-Secondary Education.....	08
Mentorship and Student Success	08
The Role of Organized Sports in Social Inclusion	09
Research Gaps	11
Conclusion	11
References	12



Overview

During the fellowship I worked with an organization called Umoja Community Mosaic. Umoja involves community members such as “children, youth and their families in shaping experiences and contributing to collective success” (Umoja Community Mosaic, 2023, p. 7). People at Umoja help the participants’ families by connecting them to necessary services, and they visit their houses to help them. Umoja fosters a culture of mutual accountability where everyone is accountable for their actions (Umoja Community Mosaic, 2023, p.8).

I explored the question “*How might we dismantle racial and socioeconomic obstacles to promote the social inclusion and participation of Black and racialized youth in higher education?*” with Umoja Community Mosaic. Umoja raised this question to explore effective strategies for supporting Black and Racialized Youth who encounter significant barriers. Removing obstacles related to race and social class is extremely important to ensure that Black and Racialized young people feel included and can take part in both higher education and organized sports, particularly in Canada. To increase Black youth’s participation in education, it is first essential to understand their needs. This will enhance their success and provide an inclusive educational experience in universities because participation in post-secondary education and playing sports leads to social inclusion.

In this report, I bring my own perspective as a Black woman arriving in Canada as a refugee. I will share insights of the hardships faced by people who come to Canada as refugees, their sense of belonging, the experiences of Black people in dealing with racism and the struggles of navigating through the education system to get into postsecondary and the positive impact of playing organized sports. It is vital to understand that Black Canadians have diverse experiences. I’ll draw from my life and literature, as well as insights from my community partner, Umoja Community Mosaic, that shaped my approach. Black youth experiences mirror racialized youth in terms of finding a sense of belonging.

Social Inclusion

Racial and class barriers impact those who need support and prevent them from connecting to essential services. Many immigrants who come to Canada speak another language other than English or French. When newcomers come to Canada, they often lack basic necessities such as housing, access to food, health care and education. So, government agencies and community-based organizations provide that support and encourage social participation. For example, newcomers may feel social exclusion if they do not have specific information about “such services as settlement, housing, employment opportunities, health, or education are not easily met” (Caidi & Allard, 2005, p. 303). Also, language barriers can prevent them from getting help and accessing available resources. Often, youth translate for their parents, and parents rely on their young children to help with paperwork and other essential tasks that require translation services.

Establishing social inclusion enables newcomers to feel safe by adopting the country’s traditions and finding their place in society, leading to increased economic and social capital (Caidi & Allard, 2005, p. 304). For many newcomers and refugees to achieve social inclusion, they must adopt “Mainstream White culture,” which leads to success in education and employment (Wilkinson, 2002, p. 177). Also, students are better at integration than their parents, which leads those students to earn higher incomes than their parents due to students’ exposure to Canadian culture through the education system (Wilkinson, 2002, p. 177). This shows that failing to adapt leads to economic stratification, which traps people in low-paying jobs and potentially unemployment. In conversation with Umoja, they suggested that some newcomers and refugees have past traumas due to living in poverty and war zones, which makes it hard for them to open up to new cultures (M. Kimler, personal communication, September 22, 2023). Most of them never had access to mental health resources, and they are not accustomed to seeking help. However, we can break cultural gaps and help people navigate through cultural shock. By doing so, people can feel more at ease in seeking support and resources. Culture-specific services at newcomers’ centers are crucial for integration, as they create a supportive social network for marginalized communities, which helps people meet others who speak the same language.



However, many immigrants in Calgary feel social and economic exclusion because they do not feel they belong to “mainstream society” (City of Calgary, 2009, p. 2). The feeling of being disconnected and isolated from the community is further caused by the presence of income inequality, which creates barriers between social classes. For example, there is an income gap between immigrant and non-immigrant families because unemployment rates are higher among immigrants (City of Calgary, 2009, p. 2). This shows the growing income disparities faced by racialized groups, who are significantly represented in low-paying jobs and lack economic opportunities. Lack of social inclusion creates a sense of being isolated and unwelcome, which can deter them from social integration. Umoja works to remove socioeconomic challenges for newcomers, refugees, and marginalized communities by providing opportunities and support networks in order to navigate through systemic racism that impacts those groups (Umoja Community Mosaic, 2023, p. 21). Inclusive environments support increased resilience that leads to long-term stability. People feel empowered when they have a sense of belonging, which leads to active participation in their communities and social integration.

Biases in Secondary Education

To increase the participation rate in post-secondary education, it is essential to first create a better post-secondary education system that leads to increased participation in post-secondary education. Students from underserved communities will enter post-secondary with “lower academic standing” due to “inequitable school funding” (Williams West, 2024, p.15). This creates an environment where students are excluded from opportunities due to their lack of academic preparedness, which also impact students’ ability to be accepted into post-secondary institutions.

Many Black students have negative experiences in post-secondary education, which may discourage them from pursuing higher education. We must first see the education system and how Black students experience it. Educators’ biases and negative stereotypes about Black students contribute to a discriminatory environment, resulting in unequal treatment compared to white students (Smith & Johnson, 2020; Thompson & Brown, 2019). A recent study on this suggested that discrimination against Black students leads to negative consequences, where students have lower post-secondary education enrollments due to negative interaction with teachers and school counselors (Shizha et al., 2020). That leads to feelings of isolation and exclusion in the learning environment where students have a right to receive support to be successful. However, accumulating such negative educational experiences over time leads to “dramatic school dropout rates, underperformance and social alienation” (Shizha et al., 2020, p. 70).

Black students are “twice as likely as their white and other racialized peers to have been suspended at least once during high school” (James & Tuner, 2017, p.35), which can lead to lower academic performance. The impact of frequent suspension can lead to over-representation in high school dropout rates and lower academic achievement, further discouraging students from pursuing post-secondary education due to a hostile environment (James & Tuner, 2017). Also, the education system has an anti-Black bias, which can impact their ability to get into university. Black students often lack guidance on enrolling in courses required for university admission, only discovering in their final year of high school that they are missing these essential classes (James & Tuner, 2017, p. 41). This is due to guidance counselors and teachers advising them to take the “Applied course” instead of “academic courses” because they have the assumption that students are not inspired to attend post-secondary education (James & Tuner, 2017, p. 41).

As a Black youth, I faced many challenges in finding a sense of belonging in high school. For instance, I often felt discouraged from pursuing post-secondary due to a lack of support from teachers and counselors. This is due to systemic structures existing in places of power, which impact whether students can access education. Because there is the act of gatekeeping, not all students will have access to high school courses needed to pursue post-secondary education (Shizha et al., 2020).

The education system often exhibits a lack of social responsibility, failing to recognize schooling as an integral part of the community. This detachment is highlighted by issues such as low teacher expectations, unsophisticated curricula, and a lack of diversity among staff, which collectively impact student performance negatively (Sefa Dei, 2008, p. 43). Similarly, the role of teachers and counselors in guiding students is critical. For example, teachers can impact students’ success because they encourage or discourage students from the necessary courses for university entrance. Also, due to gatekeeping, counselors do not provide enough advice to Black students on what classes they should take if they want to go post-secondary (Shizha et al., 2020). I also faced similar experiences where counselors in high school were pushing me to take courses required to get into community college and discouraging me from taking the courses that are needed to go to university due to the perception that Black students would underperform in those courses. That discourages students wanting to pursue post-secondary education and test their academic abilities. The literature also highlights that teachers and counselors discourage African students from pursuing higher education by ignoring them and expressing doubt about their potential (Shizha et al., 2020), which I have experienced personally. I have learned that it is crucial to foster inclusion and provide a supportive learning environment to create a positive outlook for students. This can be achieved by teachers encouraging students to enroll in courses, fostering inspiration rather than discouragement, and instilling belief in their academic capabilities. Moreover, schools require cultural sensitivity and bias training for educators and administrators to establish safe, equitable environments for students encountering anti-Black racism (Shizha et al., 2020).

Black students gain social inclusion through sports because they are seen as academically not capable but athletically gifted. Black students feel a sense of belonging when participating in school sports teams because they feel seen, heard, and supported, which leads to better academic performance (Pendergast et al., 2018, p. 8). However, Black students were recruited to sports teams only for their athletic contribution and what they could bring to school, while they did not experience the same interest for their academic abilities (James & Tuner, 2017, p. 43).

There are many factors, such as socioeconomic disparities and systemic racism and discrimination that impact how Black people live in Canada. Black individuals in Canada achieve lower levels of education compared to the general population, which leads to a high unemployment rate (Turcotte, 2020). They face obstacles which hinder access to higher education.



Barriers to Post-Secondary Education

Academic Barriers to Post-Secondary Education

Another problem that prevents people from seeking post-secondary education is how the education system is set up. For example, Wilkinson (2002) explains that refugee and immigrant students are put into lower-level programs such as special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, limiting their access to post-secondary education (p. 176). However, educational institutions must revise their processes so as not to disproportionately discriminate against disadvantaged students from entry into post-secondary. Without having met enrolment criteria in high school, individuals have to access and find funding to adult upgrading courses when considering enrolment into post secondary. Academic performance is connected with social integration and job opportunities. Newcomers or refugee students are put in catch-up classes to match the grade level they missed when they were not in Canada. That means taking more classes than Canadian-born students. Other factors that impact motivations for higher learning are “school enjoyment, helping parents adjust to Canada, gender, mental health, age, and refugee camp experience (Wilkinson, 2002, p.187). Harmful stereotypes in education systems and viewing whole groups as academic under-achievers create class barriers because they are pushed to take non-university paths. All those factors prevent social inclusion in education, and students may not find a sense of belonging in their schools.

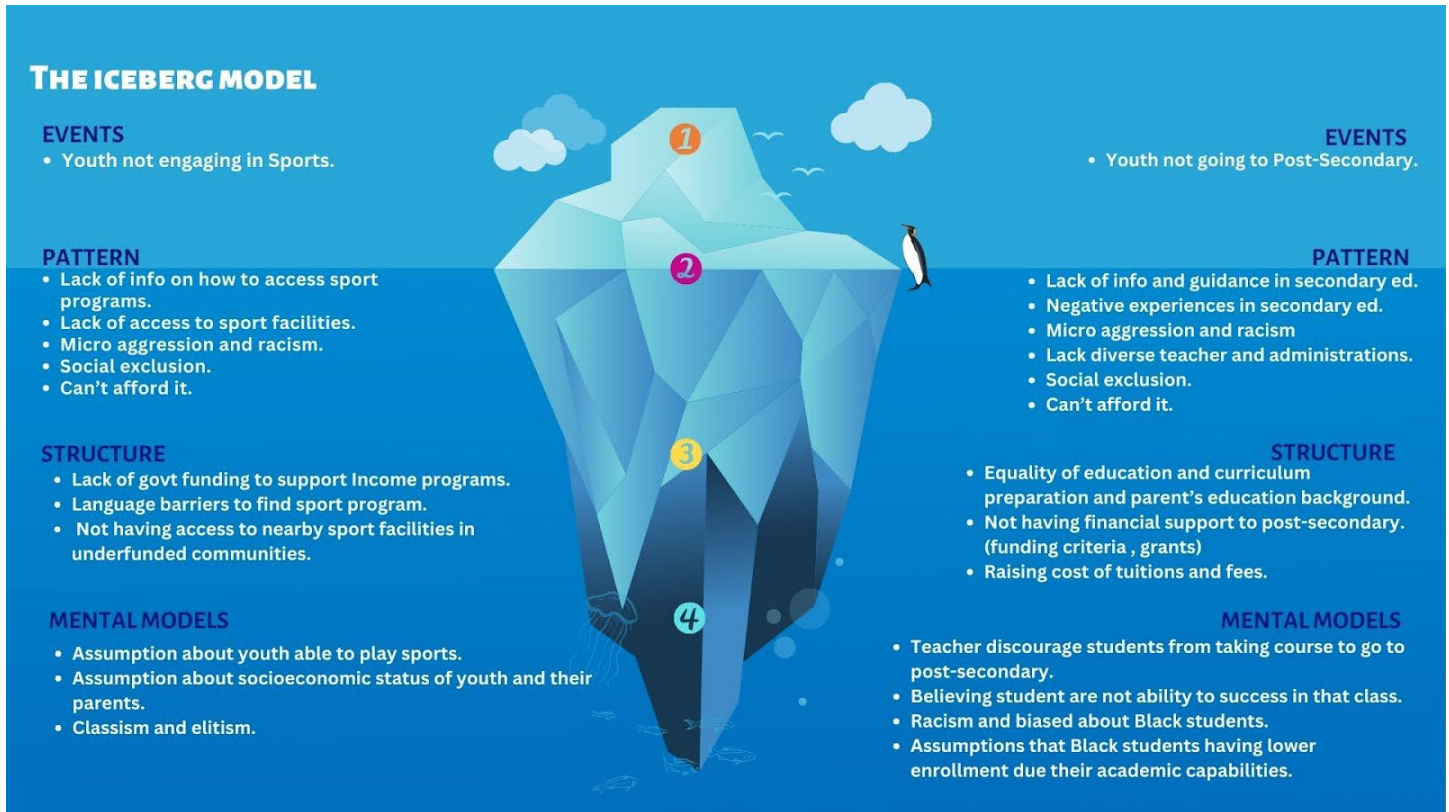
Umoja works with students who want to get into university and ensures that students know the different courses they need to obtain for admission (M. Kimler, personal communication, September 22, 2023). Students need to be made aware of other alternative ways, such as taking open studies courses, and they can use those courses for admission (M. Kimler, personal communication, September 22, 2023). That was something that some people, including myself, need to be made aware of because there are no guides on other ways but to retake high school courses. Students finish high school without taking the necessary courses for university, and when they graduate, they have to catch up with their peers (M. Kimler, personal communication, September 22, 2023). That is due to a lack of advice in high school, which leaves students unaware of how to plan for post-secondary. Additionally, schools often face a lack of funding, leading them to enroll students in courses that do not align with their academic needs or interests because the appropriate courses are unavailable for those students (M. Kimler, personal communication, September 22, 2023). Umoja checks on students, guides them on how to apply to post-secondary and encourages those students not to give up. Umoja's goal is to ensure that students graduate from high school. They are exploring new initiatives to help students who do choose to pursue post-secondary by providing support and guidance while in high school. This can save students time and money by directly taking courses from universities that they wish to apply to in the near future.

Financial Barriers to Post-Secondary Education

Financial limitations can obstruct the path to obtaining higher education for low-income students because “Black youth are at a disadvantage socioeconomically compared with other youth (Turcotte, 2020). Low-income students who go to underfunded schools tend to receive a poorer education, and those students may not have family support due to economic insecurity (Junor & Usher, 2004, p. 99). Also, Junor and Usher (2004) suggest that academic grades tend to be linked with socio-economic status, affecting young individuals from low-income families more significantly than those from wealthier families (p. 91). Having financial grants available could encourage students to apply for post-secondary education. Students from families with low socioeconomic status are less likely to pursue post-secondary education because parents' income impacts the student's goal of getting a degree (Looker & Lowe, 2001, p. 11). According to Looker and Lowe (2001), grants and scholarships increase the likelihood that minority students will stay in post-secondary (p. 24). With financial support, students can focus on their academics, leading to a higher persistence rate. Students from low-income backgrounds often delay going to university for years due to tuition costs. Financial assistance programs can reduce the barrier by making education more accessible to students who are from low-income families.

However, colleges and universities experience provincial funding cuts, leading to an increase in tuition (Mueller, 2008, p. 10). Increased tuition costs heavily impact low-income students, creating long-term financial implications such as student debt. That causes students to take fewer classes enabling them to work alongside their studies, or “drop, or opt for shorter programs” (Mueller, 2008, p. 13). Financial barriers impact the overall decision-making of students regarding whether they want to commit to getting a higher education. While having access to crucial financial support helps students to make informed post-secondary decisions. Students recognize that attaining higher education can lead to personal and financial prosperity.

An Iceberg Model of Black and Racialized Youth Participation in Sport and Post-Secondary Education



The Iceberg Model explains the underlying issues impacting the participation of Black and Racialized youth in sports and post-secondary education. At the visible 'tips of the iceberg,' we see 'Events' such as the lack of youth engagement in sports and youth not pursuing higher education. Below the surface, the 'Patterns' layer shows the systemic problems such as limited access to sports programs and a lack of guidance in secondary education. 'Structural' factors include inadequate funding for programs supporting low-income families and disparities in educational equality. The 'Mental Models,' shows ingrained beliefs that may restrict youth participation, such as assumptions about socio-economic status and racial biases that affect students' academic and athletic opportunities. This model suggests addressing the visible issues and the root causes that cause those complex issues to occur.



A Call for Change in Post-secondary Education

It is critical for schools to feature diverse literature authored by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour (BIPOC) (Delorme, 2021). Establishing a diversity council within schools fosters an environment where students feel comfortable engaging in discussions without fear of reprisal, enabling exploration and resolution of challenging issues (Delorme, 2021). This initiative creates a secure space where students can express themselves confidently, free from intimidation or harassment by school staff due to racism. Representation matters and having diversity among teachers and school administrators empowers students to embrace differences and cultivate self-esteem (Delorme, 2021). Access to role models enhances social inclusion and fosters culturally responsive learning, thereby improving academic performance. Additionally, providing anti-racism education for staff is crucial for dismantling racial biases and systemic barriers through the implementation of inclusive policies. Therefore, schools must promote justice and equity to ensure that all students are given equal value and support to achieve their potential. By accomplishing those changes, students will have a positive learning environment where they will more likely want to pursue higher education.

Education institutions like the Calgary Board of Education (CBE), a K-12 public school system, have implemented initiatives such as CBE CARES! to combat racism and discrimination (citation). CBE engages with stakeholders, including parents, guardians, and staff, in dialogue to understand their experiences and collaborates with the community to address concerns (Delorme, 2021). For instance, I learned from my lived experience that I have seen students advocate for culturally relevant education to foster a sense of belonging, achieved by integrating Indigenous and Black Canadian history into the curriculum, which currently lacks multicultural representation (Delorme, 2021).

Ways to Foster a Sense of Belonging in Post-secondary Education

Anti-Black racism in Post-Secondary Education

Once students enter post-secondary institutions, they may face racism and lack a sense of belonging. Universities and colleges are pivotal in addressing anti-Black racism to enhance student participation in post-secondary education. This can be achieved through transformative action, including adherence to the principles and actions outlined by the Scarborough Charter (University of Toronto, Scarborough, 2022). Establishing relationships with Black communities through community engagement involves developing outreach programs that facilitate access to higher education. For example, creating pathways for Black students to enter post-secondary institutions and providing scholarships and bursaries are essential steps to support their academic success (University of Toronto, Scarborough, 2022). Additionally, universities need to ensure that their staff undergo comprehensive training on anti-Black racism and to promote transparency in their anti-racism policies to foster accountability (University of Toronto, Scarborough, 2022). There is an underrepresentation of faculty of colour; universities can hire Black faculty and support them through the ranks (University of Toronto, Scarborough, 2022).

Universities can benefit from hiring faculty from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds bringing a wide variety of perspectives and experiences into academia and providing role models for students. Recognizing and dismantling structural barriers is crucial to building academic environments where Black students can thrive and reach their full potential. That can be accomplished by creating inclusion policies and practices that support Black students.

Mentorship and Student Success

Universities must implement mentorship initiatives to support student success, specifically targeting equitable outcomes. (Smith & Johnson, 2020; Thompson & Brown, 2019). For example, mentorship programs for underrepresented students provide students with a sense of belonging, which “can help address barriers toward graduation” (Williams West, 2024). It is essential to support BIPOC students through culturally responsive mentorship. For example, implementing such programs can enhance respect and understanding of students’ lived experiences because students who have mentors tend to have “more positive visions of themselves and their futures” (Williams West, 2024). These mentors are crucial in bridging educational gaps by fostering resilience against microaggressions (Williams West, 2024). For instance, students can engage in candid discussions with mentors who share similar cultural or lived experiences, promoting student involvement and connection-building to improve academic achievement and university retention (Williams West, 2024). This approach empowers students to embrace their cultural identities, countering feelings of isolation and invisibility in predominantly white spaces. Additionally, mentors offer guidance and support, motivating students to persist in completing their degrees.

The Role of Organized Sports in Social Inclusion

Organized sports are characterized as structured competitive activities coordinated by a set of rules or customs (Encyclopedia of Sports Medicine, 2011). They promote teamwork, discipline, and a sense of community and can include sports such as soccer, basketball, and baseball. Participating in organized sports can lead to improved mental and physical well-being. For example, organized sports are one way to socialize and meet new friends (Statistics Canada, 2023). Often, low-income families with youth do not participate in sports due to a lack of financial means. Such barriers prevent those youth from being part of a community, causing social exclusion. Low-income people often experience financial barriers to participating in recreational activities (M. Kimler, personal communication, September 22, 2023). Umoja creates supportive environments where the youth can feel they belong by stepping out of their comfort zone and engaging in sports. Participating in sports helps the youth develop a sense of pride and confidence when they take part in positive activities that foster their physical, social, and emotional development.

For example, Black males do not have a sense of a connection to school, and they do not plan to get into university due to how the education system treats them (M. Kimler, personal communication, September 22, 2023). Black male students are often seen as “less academically motivated than their Black female and white peers” (Higginbotham, 2021, p. 614). Also, Black female students receive support from teachers more often than their male counterparts and are seen as good students (Higginbotham, 2021, p. 614). However, Black female students face discipline for insubordination and are policed in their appearance and expressions (Higginbotham, 2021, p. 614). For example, they are policed for their physical appearance, including their hair and clothing, because they do not fit into Eurocentric standards. Also, Black female students may be viewed as more assertive or confrontational. This shows that racial and gender stereotypes of educators can negatively impact Black students’ experiences and associations with the education system as a whole. These beliefs lead to the stigmatization of Black culture and reinforce a culture of policing that harms Black people. Also, a person’s racial identity gives them a sense of belonging and participation in promoting social inclusion.

Soccer Without Boundaries is one of the initiatives that Umoja offers to youth by empowering youth in inclusive sports programs. Soccer Without Boundaries was created to fight racism and to serve communities that were impacted by “economic exclusion and social isolation” due to systemic racism (Umoja Community Mosaic, 2023, p. 4). Umoja’s sports programs promote the development of social skills and sportsmanship. Black youth often play with each other, specifically if they come from the same region due to shared life experiences, and Umoja helps those youth to open themselves up by playing in teams that are made up of other diverse groups where they are encouraged to speak English (M. Kimler, personal communication, September 22, 2023). That has helped students with social skills where they can feel comfortable making friends with others in the organization. Trust is a critical issue that a lot of people of colour struggle with due to their lived experiences with racism (M. Kimler, personal communication, September 22, 2023). Umoja involves community members such as “children, youth and their families in shaping experiences and contributing to collective success” (Umoja Community Mosaic, 2023, p. 7). People at Umoja help the participants’ families by connecting them to necessary services, and they visit their houses to help them. Umoja fosters a culture of mutual accountability where everyone is accountable for their actions (Umoja Community Mosaic, 2023, p.8).



Participants who benefit from Umoja’s programs participate in reciprocity. For example, youth who participate in sports programs have opportunities to volunteer or get paid positions as coaches, which are parts of the reciprocal process. Umoja’s sports programs are different from the recreation programs, where the participants come to play in order to build a community through the relationships that are created. Sports are an easy way to build trust through participation; through participation, the family can find a hub for social support. Soccer is a popular sport among racialized groups and is a common sport for many Black communities (Statistics Canada, 2023). Playing sports is vital for integration, where there is an opportunity to make friends. Umoja provides space for youth to play organized sports. Sports culture is centred around males, and women and girls feel left out. Umoja ensures they are accommodated in a culturally-sensitive environment. For example, Umoja supports families by allowing girls to participate in sports and ensuring that girls have religious and cultural accommodations to play without judgment, where they feel safe and welcomed. For example, some cultures do not allow girls to take part in activities in the public sphere due to culture. However, promoting a positive socio-cultural experience for everyone creates transformative experiences for players, and that helps with their sense of belonging.

Research Gaps

There are gaps in the system that come from a lack of data about the Black population in Canada. Such information is not easily accessible, especially metrics about Black students in post-secondary in Alberta. According to Statistics Canada, Black individuals make up 4.26% of the population in Alberta and 5.76% of the population in Edmonton (Cummings, 2023). There is a need to collect this data to reflect the diverse population of Canada on a provincial level. Having enough data will help create policies that help students access higher education. Also, post-secondaries must collect demographic information about their institutions. Currently, universities tend not to collect race-based data that is important for making decisions that impact Black and racialized people.

Conclusion

Social inclusion increases when people are part of the education system and have access to organized sport. However, many factors prevent Black and racialized students from participating in post-secondary education and playing organized sports. For example, the quality of post-secondary education, the socioeconomic background of students, and parents' educational background are many factors determining the likelihood of the student pursuing post-secondary education. Also, widespread discrimination and racism in an education system that Black students face tend to discourage them from getting higher education. It is crucial to create a safe and welcoming education system that is free from racism and that is funded with resources to prepare students to succeed in life. There is a need to gather metrics and to do more research about issues that impact Black and racialized communities integration and sense of belonging in Canada. That will help create more inclusive policies that improve social inclusion since the data about Black people's experience in post-secondary is not easily accessible in the literature.

Finding a sense of belonging is difficult when there is a lack of support, but having anti-racism initiatives and creating mentorship programs are ways to help increase social inclusion in post-secondary institutions. Also, the availability of important services for refugees will lead to economic and societal integration. For example, organized sports are one of the ways that people from low-income communities can build social skills and confidence to integrate into society. Reducing bias in the system leads to a better quality of life for underserved communities.

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